

The Sky Line of Spruce eBook

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PART ONE

THE WAKENING

I

The convict gang had a pleasant place to work to-day. Their road building had taken them some miles from the scattered outskirts of Walla Walla, among fields green with growing barley. The air was fresh and sweet; the Western meadow larks, newly come, seemed in imminent danger of splitting their own throats through the exuberance of their song. Even the steel rails of the Northern Pacific, running parallel to the stretch of new road, gleamed pleasantly in the spring sun.

The convicts themselves were in a genial mood, easily moved to wide grins; and with a single exception they looked much like any other road gang at work anywhere in the land. An expert might have recognized purely criminal types among them: to a layman they suggested merely the lower grades of unskilled labor. Some of the faces were distinctly brutal; there was the sullen visage of a powerful negro who, with different environment, might have been a Congo prince; but the face of "Plug" Spanos, a notorious gunman who was by far the worst character in the gang, might have been that of an artless plow-boy in a distant land under a warm sun. There remained, however, the "exception." Curiously enough, whenever the warden's thought dwelt upon the inmates of his prison, classifying them into various groups, there was always one wind-tanned, vivid face, one brawny, towering form that seemed to demand individual consideration. The man who was listed on the records as Ben Kinney was distinctly an individual. He some way failed to classify among the groups of his fellows. Because he had been sent out to-day with the road gang the two armed guards had an interesting subject of conversation.

In the first place he habitually did two men's work. He did not do it with any idea of trying to ingratiate himself with his keepers: no inmate of the institution at Walla Walla made any such mistake as that. He did it purely because he could not tone down his mighty strength and energy to stay even with his fellows. To-day Sprigley, the guard in first command of the gang, had placed him opposite Judy, the burly negro, but the latter was being driven straight toward absolute exhaustion. Yet Kinney at least knew how to subdue and direct the pouring fountain of his vitality and energy, for the robust blows of his pick fell with the regularity of a tireless machine. It was as if a wild stallion, off the plains, had been trained to draw the plow. His great muscles moved with marvelous precision; but for all the monotony and rhythm of his motions he conveyed no image of stolidity and dullness.

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He was a great, dark man, his skin darkly brown from exposure; his straight hair showed almost coal black in spite of the fact that it had but recently been clipped close; his eyebrows were similarly black; and black hairs spread down his hands almost to the finger nails and cropped up from his chest at his open throat. It was a mighty, deep, full chest, the chest of a runner and a fighter, sustained by a strong, flat abdomen and by powerful, sturdy legs. Yet physical might and development were not all of Ben Kinney. The image conveyed was never one of sheer brutality. For all their black hair, the large, brawny hands were well-shaped and sensitive; he had a healthy, good-humored mouth that could evidently, on occasion, be the seat of a most pleasant, boyish smile. He had a straight, good nose, rather high cheek bones, and a broad, brown forehead, straight rather than sloping swiftly like that of the negro opposite. But none of his features, nor yet his brawny form, caught and held the attention as did his vivid, dark-gray eyes. They were deeply dark, even against his deeply tanned face, yet now and then one caught distinct surface lights, denoting the presence of unmeasured animal spirits, and perhaps, too, the surprising health and vitality of the engine of his life. They were keen eyes, alert, fiery with a zealot's fire: evidently the eyes of a steadfast, headstrong, purposeful man. Some complexity of lines about them, hard to trace, indicated a recklessness, too; a willingness to risk all that he had for his convictions.

"That's the queerest case we ever had here at Walla Walla," Sprigley told his fellow guard, as they watched the man's pick swing in the air. "Sometimes I wonder whether he ought to be here or not. Look at that face—he hasn't any more of a criminal face than I have."

The other guard, Howard, scanned his companion's face with mock care. "That ain't sayin' so much for him," he observed. But at once he began to evince real interest. "I maintain you can't tell anything from their faces," he answered seriously. "There's nothin' in it. The man's a crook, isn't he? Wasn't he caught red-handed?"

"Let me tell you about it. I was interested in the case and found out all I could concerning it. He apparently showed up in Seattle some time during the summer of 1919, a crook of the crooks, as you say. No one knows where he came from—and that's queer in itself. You know very well that his face and form are going to be remembered and noticed, yet he wasn't in any rogue's gallery, in any city. Desperate crook though he was, no one had ever heard of him before he showed up in Seattle.

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"The crooks down there called him 'Wild' Kinney, and were pretty well scared of him. Swanson, one of the lieutenants of the Seattle force, whom I know well as I know you, told me that he was a power, sort of a king in the underworld from the very first, largely because he was afraid of nothing, absolutely desperate, and willing to take any chance. He wasn't a hop-head, yet they all looked at him as sort of queer; though ready to follow him to the last ditch, yet some way they thought him off his head. And Swanson believes that his career of crime started *after* he reached Seattle, not before—that he hadn't grown up to crime like most of the men in his gang. He didn't know anything about the 'profession'—as far as skill went he was a rank amateur, but he made it up with daring and cunning. Once or twice he got in a fight down there, and they all agree he fought like a mad man, the most terrible fighter in the whole district, and it took about a half dozen to stop him."

"You don't have to tell me that. Anybody who can swing a pick like that—"

"Now let me tell you how they happened to catch him. Maybe you heard—he and Dago Frank were in the act of breaking into the Western-Danish Bank. Part of this I'm giving you now came straight from Frank himself. He says that they were in the alley, in the act of jimmying a window, and all at once Kinney straightened up as if something had hit him and let the jimmy fall with a thump to the pavement. Frank said he thought that the man had 'gone off his nut,' but it's my private opinion that he had been somewhat deranged all the time he was in Seattle, and he just came to, more or less, that minute. The man hardly seemed to know what he was doing. 'Have you lost your guts, Kinney?' Frank asked him; and Kinney stood there, staring like he didn't know he was being spoken to. He put his hands to his head, then, like a man with a headache. And the next instant a cop came running from the mouth of the alley.

"Kinney was heeled, but he didn't even pull his gun. He still stood with his hands to his head. All his pards in the underworld always said he'd die before he'd give up, but he let the cop take him like he was a baby. Frank got away, but they got him, you remember, three weeks later. After some kind of a trial Kinney was sent down here."

Sprigley paused and shifted his gun from his right to his left shoulder. "You'll say that's all common enough," he went on. "Now let me tell you another queer thing. You know, the chief has started a system here to keep track of all the prisoners, with the idea of making them good citizens when they get out. He has them all fill out a card. Well, when this man Kinney turned in his card, he had written 'Ben' on it, but the rest was absolutely blank.

"Mr. Mitchell thought at first that the man couldn't write. It turned out, though, that he can write—an intelligent hand, and spell good too. Then Mitchell decided he was just sulking. But his second guess was no better than his first. I haven't got Mitchell persuaded yet, and maybe never will have him persuaded, but I'm confident I know the answer. The reason he didn't fill out that card was because he couldn't remember.

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"He couldn't remember where or when he was born, or who were his folks, or where he had come from, or how he had spent his life. He knew that 'Ben,' his first name, sounded right to him, but 'Kinney' didn't—the reason likely being that Kinney was an alias adopted during his life as a criminal. I suppose you've noticed that queer, bewildered look he has when any one calls him Kinney. What his real name is he doesn't know. He can't even remember that. And the explanation is—complete loss of memory.

"You mark my words, Howard—that man hasn't been a criminal always. Something got wrong with his head, and he turned crook—you might say that the criminal side that all of us has simply took possession of him. That night in the alley he came to himself—only his mind was left a blank not only in regard to his life as a criminal, but all that had gone before."

"Then why don't you do something about it—besides talk? Mitchell says you're gettin' so you talk of nothin' else."

"It's not for me to do anything about it. The man was a criminal. The State can't go any further than that. I suppose if every man was set free who wasn't, in the last analysis, responsible for his crimes, we wouldn't have anybody left in the penitentiary. He's in for five years—considering what he'll pick up here, it might as well be for life. Amnesia—that's what the doctors call it—amnesia following some sort of a mental trouble. In the end you'll see that I'm right."

Sprigley was right. To Ben Kinney life was like a single pale light in a long, dark street. Complete loss of memory prevented him from looking backward. Complete loss of hope kept him from looking ahead.

It had been this way for months now—ever since the night the policeman had found him, the "jimmy" dropped from his hands, in the alley. Heaven knows what he had done, what madness had been upon him, before that time. But as Sprigley had said, that night had marked a change. It was true that so far as facts went he was no better off: when he had come to himself he had found his mind a blank regarding not only his career of crime, but all the years that had gone before. Even his own name eluded him. That of Kinney had an alien sound in his ears.

The past had simply ceased to exist for him; and because it is some way the key to the future, the latter seemed likewise blank,—a toneless gray that did not in the least waken his interest. Indeed the only light that flung into the unfathomable darkness of his forgetfulness was that which played in his dreams at night. Sometimes these were inordinately vivid, quite in contrast to the routine of prison life.

He felt if he could only recall these dreams clearly they would interpret for him the mystery of his own life. He awakened, again and again, with the consciousness of

having dreamed the most stirring, amazing dreams, but what they were he couldn't tell. He could only remember fragments, such as a picture of rushing waters recurring again and again—and sometimes an amazing horizon, a dark line curiously notched against a pale green background.

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They were not all bad dreams: in reality many of them stirred him and moved him happily, and he would waken to find the mighty tides of his blood surging fiercely through the avenues of veins. Evidently they recalled some happiness that was forgotten. And there was one phase, at least, of this work in the road gangs that brought him moving, intense delight. It was merely the sight of the bird life, abounding in the fields and meadows about the towns.

There had been quite a northern migration lately, these late spring days. The lesser songsters were already mating and nesting, and he found secret pleasure in their cheery calls and bustling activity. But they didn't begin to move him as did the waterfowl, passing in long V-shaped flocks. That strange, wild wanderer's greeting that the gray geese called down to their lesser brethren in the meadows had a really extraordinary effect upon him. It always caught him up and held him, stirring some deep, strange part of him that he hardly knew existed. Sometimes the weird, wailing sound brought him quite to the edge of a profound discovery, but always the flocks sped on and out of hearing before he could quite grasp it. When the moon looked down, through the barred window of his cell, he sometimes felt the same way. A great, white mysterious moon that he had known long ago. It was queer that there should be a relationship between the gray geese and the cold, white satellite that rode in the sky. Ben Kinney never tried to puzzle out what it was; but he always knew it with a knowledge not to be denied.

The last of the waterfowl had passed by now, but the northern migration was not yet done. The sun still moved north; warm, north-blowing winds blew the last of the lowering, wintry clouds back to the Arctic Seas whence they had come. And because the road work the convicts were doing brought them, this afternoon, in sight of the railroad right-of-way, Ben now and then caught sight of other wayfarers moving slowly, but no less steadily, toward the north. The open road beckoned northward, these full, balmy, late-April days, and various tattered men, mostly vagabonds and tramps, passed the gang from time to time on this same, northern quest.

Ben thought about them as birds of passage, and the thought amused him. And at the sight of a small, stooped figure advancing toward him up the railroad right-of-way he paused, leaning on his pick.

Because Ben had paused, for the first time in an hour, his two guards looked up to see what had attracted his attention. They saw what seemed to them a white-haired old wanderer of sixty years or more; but at first they were wholly at a loss to explain Ben's fascinated look of growing interest.

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It was true that the old man scarcely represented the usual worthless, criminal type that took to vagabondage. As he paused to scrutinize the convict gang neither insolence nor fear, one of which was certainly to be expected, became manifest in his face. They had anticipated certain words in greeting, a certain look out of bleary, shifty eyes, but neither materialized. True, the old man was following the cinder trail northward, but plainly he did not belong to the brotherhood of tramps. They saw that he was white-haired and withered, but upright; and that undying youth dwelt in his twinkling blue eyes and the complexity of little, good-natured lines about his mouth. Poverty, age, the hardships of the cinder trail had not conquered him in the least. He was small physically, but his skinny arms and legs looked as if they were made of high-tension wire. His face was shrewd, but also kindly, and the gray stubble on his cheeks and chin did not in the least hide a smile that was surprisingly boyish and winning. And when he spoke his cracked good-natured voice was perfectly in character, evidently that of a man possessing full self-respect and confidence, yet brimming over with easy kindness and humor.

Both guards would have felt instantly, instinctively friendly toward him if they had been free to feel at all. Instead they were held and amazed by the apparent fact that at the first scrutiny of the man's outline, his carriage and his droll, wrinkled face, the prisoner Kinney was moved and stirred as if confronted by the risen dead.

The old man himself halted, returning Kinney's stare. The moment had, still half concealed, an unmistakable quality of drama. In the contagion of suppressed excitement, the other prisoners paused, their tools held stiffly in their hands. Kinney's mind seemed to be reaching, groping for some astonishing truth that eluded him.

The old man ran, in great strides, toward him. "My God, aren't you Ben Darby?" he demanded.

The convict answered him as from a great distance, his voice cool and calm with an infinite certainty. "Of course," he said. "Of course I'm Darby."

II

For the moment that chance meeting thrilled all the spectators with the sense of monumental drama. The convicts stared; Howard, the second guard, forgot his vigilance and stared with open mouth. He started absurdly, rather guiltily, when the old man whirled toward him.

"What are you doing with Ben Darby in a convict gang?" the old wanderer demanded.

"What am I doin'?" Howard's astonishment gave way to righteous indignation. "I'm guardin' convicts, that's what I'm a-doin'." He composed himself then and shifted his

gun from his left to his right shoulder. “He’s here in this gang because he’s a convict. Ask my friend, here, if you want to know the details. And who might you be?”

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There was no immediate answer to that question. The old man had turned his eyes again to the tall, trembling figure of Ben, trying to find further proof of his identity. To Ezra Melville there could no longer be any shadow of doubt as to the truth: even that he had found the young man working in a gang of convicts could not impugn the fact that the dark-gray vivid eyes, set in the vivid face under dark, beetling brows, were unquestionably those of the boy he had seen grow to manhood's years, Ben Darby.

It was true that he had changed. His face was more deeply lined, his eyes more bright and nervous; there was a long, dark scar just under the short hair at his temple that Melville had never seen before. And the finality of despair seemed to settle over the droll features as he walked nearer and took Darby's hand.

"Ben, Ben!" he said, evidently struggling with deep emotion. "What are you doing here?"

The younger man gave him his hand, but continued to stare at him in growing bewilderment. "Five years—for burglary," he answered simply. "Guilty, too—I don't know anything more. And I can't remember—who you are."

"You don't know me?" Some of Ben's own bewilderment seemed to pass to him. "You know Ezra Melville—"

Sprigley, whose beliefs in regard to Ben had been strengthened by the little episode, stepped quickly to Melville's side. "He's suffering loss of memory," he explained swiftly. "At least, he's either lost his memory or he's doing a powerful lot of faking. This is the first time he ever recalled his own name."

"I'm not faking," Ben told them quietly. "I honestly don't remember you—I feel that I ought to, but I don't. I honestly didn't remember my name was Darby until a minute ago—then just as soon as you spoke it, I knew the truth. Nothing can surprise me, any more. I suppose you're kin of mine—?"

Melville gazed at him in incredulous astonishment, then turned to Sprigley. "May I talk to you about this case?" he asked quietly. "If not to you, who can I talk to? There are a few points that might help to clear up—"

Ordering his men to their work, Melville and Sprigley stood apart, and for nearly an hour engaged in the most earnest conversation. The afternoon was shadow-flaked and paling when they had finished, and before Sprigley led his men back within the gray walls he had arranged for Melville to come to the prison after the dinner hour and confer with Mitchell, the warden.

Many and important were the developments arising from this latter conference. One of the least of them was that Melville's northward journey was postponed for some days,



and that within a week this same white-haired, lean old man, dressed in the garb of the cinder trail, was pleading his case to no less a personage than the governor of the State of Washington in whom authority for dealing with Ben's case was absolutely vested. It came about, from the same cause, that a noted alienist, Forest, of Seattle, visited Ben Darby in his cell; and finally that the prisoner himself, under the strict guard of Sprigley, was taken to the capital at Olympia.

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The brief inquisition that followed, changing the entire current of Ben Darby's life, occurred in the private office of McNamara, the Governor. McNamara himself stood up to greet them when they entered, the guard and the convict. Ezra Melville and Forest, the alienist from Seattle, were already in session. The latter conducted the examination.

He tried his subject first on some of the most simple tests for sanity. It became evident at once, however, that except for his amnesia Ben's mind was perfectly sound: he passed all general intelligence tests with a high score, he conversed easily, he talked frankly of his symptoms. He had perfect understanding of the general sweep of events in the past twenty years: his amnesia seemed confined to his own activities and the activities of those intimately connected with him. Where he had been, what he had done, all the events of his life up to the night of his arrest remained, for all his effort to remember them, absolutely in darkness.

"You don't remember this man?" Forest asked him quietly, indicating Ezra Melville.

Again Ben's eyes studied the droll, gray face. "With the vaguest kind of memory. I know I've seen him before—often. I can't tell anything else."

"He's a good friend of your family. He knew your folks. I should say he was a *very* good friend, to take the trouble and time he has, in your behalf."

Ben nodded. He did not have to be told that fact. The explanation, however, was beyond him.

Forest leaned forward. "You remember the Saskatchewan River?"

Ben straightened, but the dim images in his mind were not clear enough for him to answer in the affirmative. "I'm afraid not."

Melville leaned forward in his chair. "Ask him if he remembers winning the canoe race at Lodge Pole—or the time he shot the Athabaska Rapids."

Ben turned brightly to him, but slowly shook his head. "I can't remember ever hearing of them before."

"I think you would, in time," Forest remarked. "They must have been interesting experiences. Now what do these mean to you?—Thunder Lake—Abner Darby—Edith Darby—MacLean's College——"

Ben relaxed, focusing his attention on the names. For the instant the scene about him, the anxious, interested faces, faded from his consciousness. Thunder Lake! Somewhere, some time, Thunder Lake had had the most intimate associations with his

life. The name stirred him and moved him; dim voices whispered in his ears about it, but he couldn't quite catch what they said. He groped and reached in vain.

There was no doubt but that an under-consciousness had full knowledge of the name and all that it meant. But it simply could not reach that knowledge up into his conscious mind.

Abner Darby! It was curious what a flood of tenderness swept through him as, whispering, he repeated the name. Some one old and white-haired had been named Abner Darby: some one whom he had once worshipped with the fervor of boyhood, but who had leaned on his own, strong shoulders in latter years. Since his own name was Darby, Abner Darby was, in all probability, his father; but his reasoning intelligence, rather than his memory, told him so.

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The name of Edith Darby conjured up in his mind a childhood playmate,—a girl with towzled yellow curls and chubby, confiding little hands.... But these dim memory-pictures went no further: there were no later visions of Edith as a young woman, blossoming with virgin beauty. They stopped short, and he had a deep, compelling sense of grief. The child, unquestionably a sister, had likely died in early years. The third name of the three, MacLean's College, called up no memories whatever.

"I can hardly say that I remember much about them," he responded at last. "I think they'll come plainer, though, the more I think about them. I just get the barest, vague ideas."

"They'll strengthen in time, I'm sure," Forest told him. "Put them out of your mind, for now. Let it be blank." The alienist again leaned toward him, his eyes searching. There ensued an instant's pause, possessing a certain quality of suspense. Then Forest spoke quickly, sharply. "*Wolf* Darby!"

In response a curious tremor passed over Ben's frame, giving in some degree the effect of a violent start. "*Wolf* Darby," he repeated hesitantly. "Why do you call me that?"

"The very fact that you know the name refers to you, not some one else, shows that that blunted memory of yours has begun to function in some degree. Now think. What do you know about 'Wolf' Darby?"

Ben tried in vain to find an answer. A whole world of meaning lingered just beyond the reach of his groping mind; but always it eluded him. It was true, however, that the name gave him a certain sense of pleasure and pride, as if it had been used in compliment to some of his own traits. Far away and long ago, men had called *him* "Wolf" Darby: he felt that perhaps the name had carried far, through many sparsely settled districts. But what had been the occasion for it he did not know.

He described these dim memory pictures; and Forest's air of satisfaction seemed to imply that his own theories in regard to Ben's case were receiving justification. He appeared quite a little flushed, deeply intent, when he turned to the next feature of the examination. He suddenly spoke quietly to old Ezra Melville; and the latter put a small, cardboard box into his hands.

"I want you to see what I have here," Forest told Ben. "They were your own possessions once—you sent them yourself to Abner Darby, your late father—and I want you to see if you remember them."

Ben's eyes fastened on the box; and the others saw a queer drawing of the lines of his face, a curious tightening and clasping of his fingers. There was little doubt but that his subconsciousness had full cognizance of the contents of that box. He was trembling

slightly, too—in excitement and expectation—and Ezra Melville, suddenly standing erect, was trembling too. The moment was charged with the uttermost suspense.

Evidently this was the climax in the examination. Even McNamara, the Governor, was breathless with interest in his chair; Forest had the rapt look of a scientist in some engrossing experiment. He opened the box, taking therefrom a roll of white cotton. This he slowly unrolled, revealing two small, ribboned ornaments of gold or bronze.

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Ben's starting eyes fastened on them. No doubt he recognized them. A look of veritable anguish swept his brown face, and all at once small drops of moisture appeared on his brow and through the short hairs at his temples. The dark scar at his temple was suddenly brightly red from the pounding blood beneath.

"The Victoria Cross, of course," he said slowly, brokenly. "I won it, didn't I—the day—that day at Ypres—the day my men were trapped—"

His words faltered then. The wheels of *his* memory, starting into motion, were stilled once more. Again the great darkness dropped over him; there were only the medals left in their roll of cotton, and the broken fragments of a story—of some wild, stirring event of the war just gone—remaining in his mind. Yet to Forest the experiment was an unqualified success.

"There's no doubt of it!" he exclaimed. He turned to McNamara, the Governor. "His brain is just as sound as yours or mine. With the right environment, the right treatment, he'd be on the straight road to recovery. In a general way of speaking he has recovered now, largely, from the purely temporary trouble that he had before."

McNamara focused an intent gaze first on Ben, then on the alienist. "It is, then—as you guessed."

"Absolutely. The night of his arrest marked the end of his trouble; you might say that his brain simply snapped back into health and began to function normally again, after a period of temporary mania from shell-shock. It is true that his memory was left blank, but there doesn't seem to be any organic reason for it to be blank—other than lack of incentive to remember. Catch me up, if you don't follow me. In other words, he has been slowly convalescing since that night: under the proper stimuli I have no doubt that everything would come back to him."

"And our friend here—Melville—offers to supply those stimuli."

"Exactly. And it's up to you to say whether he gets a chance."

Thoughtfully the executive drummed his desk with his pencil. Presently a smile, markedly boyish and pleasant, broke over his face. More than once, in the line of duty imposed by his high office, he had been obliged to make decisions contrary to every dictate of mercy. He was all the more pleased at this opportunity to do, with a clear conscience, the thing that his kindness prompted. He turned slowly in his chair.

"Darby, I suppose you followed what the doctor said?" he asked easily.

"Fairly well, I think."

“I’ll review it, if I may. It seems, Ben, that you have been the victim of a strange set of unfortunate circumstances. Due to the efforts of an old family friend—a most devoted and earnest friend if I may say so—we’ve looked up your record, and now we know more about you than you know about yourself. You served in France with Canadian troops and there, you will be proud to know, you won among other honors the highest honor that the Government of England can award a hero. There you were shell-shocked, in the last months of the war.

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"You did not return to your home. Shell-shock, Forest tells me, is a curious thing, resulting in many forms of mania. Yours led you into crime. For some months you lived as a desperate criminal in Seattle. You came to yourself in the act of breaking into a bank, only to find that your memory of not only your days of crime but all that had gone before was left a blank. That night, as you know, marked your arrest.

"Forest has just explained that you are organically sound—that the recovery of your memory is just a matter of time and the proper stimuli. Now, Ben, it isn't the purpose of this State to punish men when they are not responsible for their deeds. Melville tells me that your record, in your own home, was the best; your war record alone, I believe, would entitle you to the limit of mercy from the State. I don't see how we can hold you responsible for deeds done while you were mentally disabled from shell-shock.

"All you need for complete recovery, to call everything back in your mind, is the proper stimuli. At least that is the opinion of Doctor Forest. What those proper stimuli are of course no one knows for sure—but Doctor Forest has a theory; and I think he will tell you that he will share the credit for it with the same man who has been your friend all the way through. They think they know what is best for you. The final decision has been put up to me as to whether or not they shall be permitted to give it a trial.

"This good friend of yours has offered to try to put it through. He has a plan outlined that he'll tell you of later, that will not only be the best possible influence toward recalling your memory, but will also give you a clean, new start in life. A chance for every success.

"So you needn't return to Walla Walla, Darby. I'm going to parole you—under the charge of your benefactor. Melville, from now on it's up to you."

The little, withered gray man looked very solemn as he rose. The others were stricken instantly solemn too, surprised that the droll smile they were so used to seeing had died on the homely, kindly face. Even his twinkling eyes were sobered too.

Vaguely amused, yet without scorn, McNamara and Forest got up to shake his hand. "I'll look after him," Melville assured them. "Never fear for that."

Slight as he was, wasted by the years, his was a figure of unmistakable dignity as he thanked them, gravely and earnestly, for their kindness in Ben's behalf. Soon after he and his young charge went out together.

III

There was a great house-cleaning in the dome of the heavens one memorable night that flashed like a jewel from the murky desolation of a rainy spring. The little winds came in troops, some from the sea, some with loads of balsam from the great forests of

the Olympic Peninsula, and some, quite tired out, from the stretching sage plains to the east, and they swept the sky of clouds as a housekeeper sweeps the ceiling of cobwebs. Not a wisp, not one trailing streamer remained.

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The Seattle citizenry, for the first time in some weeks, recalled the existence of the stars. These emerged in legions and armies, all the way from the finest diamond dust to great, white spheres that seemed near enough to reach up and touch. Little forgotten stars that had hidden away since Heaven knows when in the deepest recesses of the skies came out to join in the celebration. Aged men, half blind, beheld so many that they thought their sight was returning to them, and youths saw whole constellations that they had never beheld before. They continued their high revels until a magnificent moon rose in the east, too big and too bright to compete with.

It was not just a crescent moon, about to fade away, or even a rain moon—one of those standing straight up in the sky so that water can run out as out of a dipper. It was almost at its full, large and nearly round, and it made the whole city, which is rather like other cities in the daylight, seem a place of enchantment. It was so bright that the electric signs along Second Avenue were not even counter-attractions.

No living creature who saw it remained wholly unmoved by it. Wary young men, crafty and slick as foxes, found themselves proposing to their sweethearts before they could catch themselves; and maidens who had looked forward to some years yet of independent gaiety found themselves accepting. Old tom-cats went wooing; old spinsters got out old letters; old husbands thought to return and kiss their wives before venturing down to old, moth-eaten clubs. Old dogs, too well-bred to howl, were lost and absent-minded with dreams that were older than all the rest of these things put together.

But to no one in the city was the influence of the moon more potent than to Ben Darby, once known as “Wolf” Darby through certain far-spreading districts, and now newly come from the State capital, walking Seattle’s streets with his ward and benefactor, Ezra Melville. No matter how faltering was his memory in other regards, the moon, at least, was an old acquaintance. He had known it in the nights when its light had probed into his barred cell; but his intimate acquaintance with it had begun long, long before that. Not even the names that the alienist, Forest, had spoken—the names of places and people close to his own heart—stirred his memory like the sight of the mysterious sphere rolling through the empty places of the sky. It recalled, clearer than any other one thing, the time and place of his early years.

He could not put into words just how it affected him. From first to last, even through his days of crime, it had been the one thing constant—the unchanging symbol—that in any manner connected his present with his shadowed past. It had served to recall in him, more than any other one thing, the fact that there was a past to look for—the assurance that somewhere, far away, he had been something more than a reckless criminal in city slums.

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The love he had for it was an old love, proving to him conclusively that his past life had been intimately associated, some way, with moonlight falling in open places. Yet the mood that was awakened in him went even farther. It was as if the sight of the argent satellite stirred and moved deep-buried instincts innate in him, in no way connected with any experience of his immediate life. Rather it was as if his love for it were a racial love, reaching back beyond his own life: something inborn in him. It was as if he were recalling it, not alone from his own past, but from a racial existence a thousand-thousand years before his own birth. His memory was strangely stifled, but, oh, he remembered the moon! Forest had spoken of stimuli! The mere sight of the blue-white beams was the best possible stimulus to call him to himself.

Ezra Melville and he walked under it, talking little at first, and mostly the old, blue twinkling eyes watched his face. Seemingly with no other purpose than to escape the bright glare of the street lights they walked northward along the docks, below Queen Anne Hill, passed old Rope Walk, through the suburb of Ballard, finally emerging on the Great Northern Railroad tracks heading toward Vancouver and the Canadian border. For all that Ben's long legs had set a fast pace Melville kept cheerfully beside him throughout the long walk, seemingly without trace of fatigue.

They paused at last at a crossing, and Ben faced the open fields. Evidently, before crime had claimed him, he had been deeply sensitive to nature's beauty. Ezra saw him straighten, his dark, vivid face rise; his quiet talk died on his lips. Evidently the peaceful scene before him went home to him very straight. He was very near thralldom from some quality of beauty that dwelt here, some strange, deep appeal that the moonlit realm made to his heart.

For the moment Ben had forgotten the old, tried companion at his side. Vague memories stirred him, trying to convey him an urgent message. He could all but hear: the sight of the meadows, ensilvered under the moon, were making many things plain to him which before were shadowed and vague. The steel rails gleamed like platinum, the tree tops seemed to have white, molten metal poured on them. It was hard to take his eyes off those moonlit trees. They got to him, deep inside; thrilling to him, stirring. Perhaps in his Lost Land the moon shone on the trees this same way.

There were no prison walls around him to-night. The high buildings behind him, pressing one upon another, had gone to sustain the feeling of imprisonment, but it had quite left him now. There were no cold, watchful lights,—only the moon and the stars and an occasional mellow gleam from the window of a home. There was scarcely any sound at all; not even a stir—as of prisoners tossing and uneasy in their cells. His whole body felt rested.

The air was marvelously sweet. Clover was likely in blossom in nearby fields. He breathed deep, an unknown delight stealing over him. He stole on farther, into the mystery of the night—ravished, tingling and almost breathless from an inner and inexplicable excitement. Melville walked quietly beside him.

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Forest had given over the case: it was Melville's time for experiments to-night. All the way out he had watched his patient, sounding him, studying his reactions and all that he had beheld had gone to strengthen his own convictions. And now, after this moment in the meadows, the old man was ready to go on with his plan.

"Let's set down here," he invited casually. Ben started, emerging from his reverie. The old man's cheery smile had returned, in its full charm, to his droll face. "You'll want to know what it's all about—and what I have in mind. And I sure think you've done mighty well to hold onto your patience this long."

He sat himself on the rail, and Ben quietly took a seat beside him. "There are plenty of things I'd like to know," he admitted.

"And plenty of things I ain't goin' to tell you, neither—for the reason that Forest advised against it," Ezra went on. "I don't understand it—but he says you've got a lot better chance to get your memory workin' clear again if things are recalled to you by the aid of 'stimuli' instead of having any one tell you. I've agreed to supply the 'stimuli.'"

"I don't see any harm in tellin' you that the guesses you've already made are right. Your name is Ben Darby—and you used to be known as 'Wolf' Darby—for reasons that sooner or later you may know. Abner Darby was your father. Edith Darby was your sister that ain't no more. You went awhile to MacLean's College, in Ontario.

"Now, Ben, I'm going to put a proposition up to you. I'm hoping you'll see fit to accept it. And I might as well say right here, that while it's the best plan possible to bring you back your memory, and that while it offers just the kind of 'stimuli' you're supposed to need, neither 'stimuli' nor stimulus or stimulum has got very much to do with it. I argued that point mighty strong because I knew it would appeal to Forest, and through him, to the governor. I don't see it makes a whale of a lot of difference whether you get your memory back or not.

"Maybe you don't foller me. But you know and I know you're all right now, remembering clear enough everything that happened since you was arrested, and I don't see what difference it makes whether or not you remember who your great-aunt was, and the scrapes you got in as a kid. You can talk and walk and figger, get by in any comp'ny, and you suit me for a buddy just as you are. However, Forest seemed to think it was mighty important—and it may be.

"The reason I'm goin' to take you where I'm goin' to take you is for your own good. I'm sort of responsible for you, bein' your folks are dead. I know you from head to heel, and I think I know what's good for you, what you can do and what you can't do and where you succeed and where you fail. And I'll say right here you wasn't born to be no gangman in a big city like Seattle. You'll find that isn't your line at all."

“I’m willing to take your word for that, Mr. Melville,” Ben interposed quietly.

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"And I might say, now a good time as any, to let up on the '*Mister*.' My name is Ezra Melville, and I've been known as 'Ezram' as long as I can remember, to my friends. The Darbys in particular called me that, and you're a Darby.

"I'll say in the beginning I can't do for you all I'd like to do, simply because I haven't the means. The first time you saw me I was walkin' ties, and you'll see me walkin' some more of 'em before you're done. I know you ain't got any money, and due to the poker habit I ain't got much either—in spite of the fact I've done two men's work for something over forty years. On this expedition to come we'll have to go on the cheaps. No Pullmans, no hotels—sleeping out the hay when we're caught out at night. Maybe ridin' the blinds, whenever we can. I'm awful sorry, but it jest can't be helped. But I will say—when it comes to work I can do my full share, without kickin'."

Ben stared in amazement. It was almost as if the old man were pleading a case, rather than giving glorious alms to one to whom hope had seemed dead. Ben tried to cut in, to ask questions, but the old man's words swept his own away.

"To begin at the beginning, I've got a brother—leastwise I had him a few weeks ago—Hiram Melville by name," Ezram went on. "You'd remember him well enough. He was a prospector up to a place called Snowy Gulch—a town way up in the Caribou Mountains, in Canada. Some weeks ago, herdin' cattle in Eastern Oregon, I got a letter from him, and started north, runnin' into you on the way up. The letter's right here."

He drew a white envelope from his coat pocket, opening it slowly. "This is a real proposition, son," he went on in a sobered voice. "I'm mighty glad that I've got something, at least worth lookin' into, to let you in on. I only wish it was more."

"Why should you want to let me in on anything?" Ben asked clearly.

The direct question received only a stare of blank amazement from Ezram. "Why should I—" he repeated, seemingly surprised out of his life by the question. "Shucks, and quit interruptin' me. But I'll say right here I've got my own ideas, if you must know. Didn't I hear that while you was rampin' around the underworld, you showed yourself a mighty good fighter? Well, there's likely to be some fightin' where we're goin', and I want some one to do it besides myself. If there ain't fightin', at least they'll be worklots of work. Maybe I'm gettin' a little too old to do much of it. I want a buddy—some one who will go halfway with me."

"Therefore I suppose you go to the 'pen' to find one," Ben commented, wholly unconvinced.

"I'm going to make this proposition good," Ezram went on as if he had not heard, "probably a fourth—maybe even a third—to you. And I ain't such a fool as I look,

neither. I know the chances of comin' out right on it are twice as good if somebody young and strong, and who can fight, is in on it with me. Listen to this."

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Opening the letter, he read laboriously:

Snowy Gulch, B.C.

Dear brother Ezra:—

I rite this with what I think is my dying hand. It's my will too. I'm at the hotel at Snowy Gulch—and not much more time. You know I've been hunting a claim. Well, I found it—rich a pocket as any body want, worth a quarter million any how and in a district where the Snowy Gulch folks believe there ain't a grain of gold. It's yours. Come up and get it quick before some thieves up hear jump it. Lookout for Jeffery Neilson and his gang they seen some of my dust. I'm too sick to go to recorder in Bradleyburg and record claim. Get copy of this letter to carry, put this in some safe place. The only condition is you take good care of Fenris, the pet I raised from a pup. You'll find him and my gun at Steve Morris's. I felt myself going and just did get hear. You get supplies horses at Snowy Gulch go up Poor Man Creek through Spruce Pass over to Yuga River. Go down Yuga River past first rapids along still place to first creek you'll know it cause there's an old cabin just below and my canoe landing. Half mile up, in creek bed, is the pocket and new cabin. And don't tell no one in Snowy Gulch who you are and where you going. Go quick brother Ez and put up a stone for me at Snowy Gulch.

Your brother

Hiram Melville.

There was a long pause after Ezram's voice had died away. Ben's eyes glowed in the moonlight.

"And you haven't heard—whether your brother is still alive?"

"I got a wire the hotel man sent me. It reached me weeks before the letter came, and I guess he must have died soon after he wrote it. I suppose you see what he means when he says to carry a copy of this letter, instead of the original."

"Of course—because it constitutes his will, your legal claim. Just the fact that you are his brother would be claim enough, I should think, but since the claim isn't recorded, this simplifies matters for you. You'd better make a copy of it and you can leave it in some safe place. And of course this claim is what you offered to let me in on."

"That's it. Not much, but all what I got. What I want to know is—if it's a go."

"Wait just a minute. You've asked me to go in with you on a scheme that looks like a clear quarter of a million, even though I can't give anything except my time and my work. You found me in a penitentiary, busted and all in—a thief and a gangster. Before

we go any further, tell me what service I've done you, what obligation you're under to me, that gives me a right to accept so much from you?"

It might have been in the moonlight that Ezram's eyes glittered perceptibly. "You're in my charge," he grinned. "I guess you ain't got any say comin'."

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"Wait—wait." Ben sprang to his feet, and caught by his earnestness, Ezram got up too. "I sure—I sure appreciate the trust you put in me," Ben went on slowly. "For my own part I'd give everything I've got and all I'd hope to ever get to go with you. It's a chance such as I never dared believe would come to me again—a chance for big success—a chance to go away and get a new start in a country where I feel, instinctively, that I'd make good. But that's only the beginning of it."

The dark vivid eyes seemed to glow in the soft light. "Forgive me if I talk frank; and if it sounds silly I can't help it," Ben continued. "You've never been in prison—with a five-year sentence hanging over you—and nobody giving a damn. For some reason I can't guess you've already done more for me than I can ever hope to repay. You got me out of prison, you wakened hope and self-respect in me when I thought they were dead, and you've proved a friend when I'd given up any thought of ever knowing human friendship again. I was down and out, Ezram. Anything you want me to do I'll do to the last ditch. You know I can fight—you know how a man can fight if it's his last chance. I've got some bonus money coming to me from the Canadian Government—and I'll put that in too, because we'll be needing horses and supplies and things that cost money. But I can't take all that from a stranger. You must know how it is. A man can't, while he's young and strong, accept charity—"

"Good Lord, it ain't charity!" the old man shouted, drowning him out. "I'm gettin' as much pleasure out of it as you." His voice sank again; and there was no line of mirth in his face.

"It was long ago, in Montreal," Ezram went on, after a pause. "I knew your mother, as a girl. She married a better man, but I told her that every wish of hers was law to me. You're her son."

IV

Night is always a time of mystery in Snowy Gulch—that little cluster of frame shacks lost and far in the northern reaches of the Caribou Range. Shadows lie deep, pale lights spring up here and there in windows, with gaping, cavernous darkness between; a wet mist is clammy on the face. At such times one forgets that here is a town, an enduring outpost of civilization, and can remember only the forests that stretch so heavy and dark on every side. Indeed the town seems simply swallowed up in these forests, immersed in their silence, overspread by their gloom, and the red gods themselves walk like sentries in the main street.

The breath that is so fragrant and strange between the fronting rows of shacks is simply that of the forest: inept the woodsman who would not recognize it at once. The silence is a forest silence, and if the air is tense and electric, it is because certain wilderness

forces that no white man can name but which surely dwell in the darker thickets have risen and are in possession.

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It is not a time when human beings are at their best and strongest. There is an instinctive, haunting feeling which, though not fear, wakens a feeling of inadequacy and meekness. Only a few—those who have given their love and their lives to the wild places—have any idea of sympathetic understanding with it. Among these was Beatrice Neilson, and she herself did not fully understand the dreams and longings that swept her ever at the fall of the mysterious wilderness night.

The forest had never grown old to her. Its mystery was undying. Born in its shadow, her love had gone out to it in her earliest years, and it held her just as fast to-day. All her dreams—the natural longings of an imaginative girl born to live in an uninhabited portion of the earth—were inextricably bound up in it; whatever plans she had for the future always included it. Not that she was blind to its more terrible qualities: its might and its utter remorselessness that all foresters, sooner or later, come to recognize. Her thews were strong, and she loved it all the more for the tests that it put to its children.

She was a daughter of the forests, and its mark was on her. To-night the same moon that, a thousand miles to the south, was lighting the way for Ben and Ezram on their northern journey, shone on her as she hastened down the long, shadowed street toward her father's shack, revealing her forest parentage for all to see. The quality could be discerned in her very carriage—swift and graceful and silent—vaguely suggesting that of the wild creatures themselves. But there was no coarseness or ruggedness about her face and form such as superficial observation might have expected. Physically she was like a deer, strong, straight-limbed, graceful, slender rather than buxom, dainty of hands and feet. A perfect constitution and healthful surroundings had done all this. And good fairies had worked further magic: as she passed beneath the light at the door of the rude hotel there was revealed an unquestioned and rather startling facial beauty.

It seemed hardly fitting in this stern, rough land—the soft contour and delicacy of the girl's features. It had come straight from her mother, a woman who, in gold-rush days, had been the acknowledged beauty of the province. Nor was it merely the attractive, animal beauty that is so often seen in healthy, rural girls. Rather its loveliness was of a mysterious, haunting kind that one associates with old legends and far distant lands.

Perhaps its particular appeal lay in her eyes. They seemed to be quite marvelously deep and clear, so darkly gray that they looked black in certain lights, and they were so shadowed and pensive that sometimes they gave the image of actual sadness. For all the isolation of her home she was no stranger to romance; but the romance that was to be seen, like a gentleness, in her face was that of the great, shadowed forest in which she dwelt.

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Pensive, wistful, enthralled in a dreamy sadness,—what could be nearer the tone and pitch of the northern forest itself? There might have been also depths of latent passion such as is known to all who live the full, strong life of the woods. The lines were soft about her lips and eyes, indicating a marked sweetness and tenderness of nature; but these traits did not in the least deny her parentage. No one but the woodsman knows how gentle, how hospitably tender, the forest may be at times.

She had fine, dark straight brows that served to darken her eyes, dark brown hair waving enough to soften every line of her face, a girlish throat and a red mouth surprisingly tender and childish. As might have been expected her garb was neither rich nor smart, but it was pretty and well made and evidently fitted for her life: a loose “middy,” blue skirt, woolen stockings and rather solid little boots.

As she passed the door of the hotel one of the younger men who had been lounging about the stove strode out and accosted her. She half-turned, recognized his face in the lamplight, and frankly recoiled.

She had been lost in dreams before, vaguely pensive, for Beatrice had been watching the darkness overspread and encompass the dark fringe of the spruce forest that enclosed the town. Now, because she recognized the man and knew his type—born of the wild places even as herself, but a bastard breed—the tender, wistful half-smile sped from her childish mouth and her eyes grew alert and widened as if with actual fear. She halted, evidently in doubt as to her course.

“Going home?” the man asked. “I’m going up to see your pop, and I’ll see you there, if you don’t mind.”

Ray Brent’s voice had an undeniable ring of power. It was deeply bass, evidently the voice of a passionate, reckless, brutal man. The covetous caress of his thick hand upon her arm indicated that he was wholly sure of himself in regard to her.

She stared with growing apprehension into his even-featured, not unhandsome face. Evidently she found it hard to meet his eyes,—eyes wholly lacking in humor and kindness, but unquestionably vivid and compelling under his heavy, dark brows. “I’m going home,” she told him at last. “I guess, if you’re going up to see Pop, you can walk along too.”

The man fell in beside her, his powerful frame overshadowing hers. It was plain at once that the manner of her consent did not in the least disturb him. “You’re just letting me because I’m going up there anyway, eh?” he asked. “I’ll walk along further than that with you before I’m done.”

The girl paused, as if in appeal. “Ray, we’ve thrashed that out long ago,” she responded. “I wish you wouldn’t keep talking about it. If you want to walk with me—”

“All right, but you’ll be changing your mind one of these days.” Ray’s voice rang in the silence, indicating utter indifference to the fact that many of the loungers on the street were listening to the little scene. “I’ve never seen anything I wanted yet that I didn’t get—and I want you. Why don’t you believe what your pop says about me? He thinks Ray Brent is the goods.”

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"I'm not going to talk about it any more. I've already given you my answer—twenty times."

The man talked on, but the girl walked with lifted chin, apparently not hearing. They followed the board sidewalk into the shadows, finally turning in at a ramshackle, three-room house that was perched on the hillside almost at the end of the street at the outer limits of the village.

The girl turned to go in, but the man held fast to her arm. "Wait just a minute, Bee," he urged. "I've got one thing more to say to you."

The girl looked into his face, now faintly illumined by the full moon that was rising, incredibly large and white, above the dark line of the spruce tops. For all the regularity of his rather handsome features, his was never an attractive face to her, even in first, susceptible girlhood; and in the moonlight it suddenly filled her with dread. Ray Brent was a dangerous type: imperious willed, slave to his most degenerate instincts, reckless, as free from moral restraint as the most savage creatures that roamed his native wilds. Now his facial lines appeared noticeably deep, dark like scars, and curious little flakes of iniquitous fire danced in his sunken eyes.

"Just one minute, Bee," he went on, wholly rapt in his own, devouring desires. The dark passions of the man, always just under the skin, seemed to be getting out of bounds. "When I want something, I don't know how to quit till I get it. It's part of my nature. Your pop knows that—and that's why he's made me his pardner in a big deal."

"If my father wants men like you—for his pardners, I can't speak for his judgment."

"Wait just a minute. He's told me—and I know he's told you too—that I'd suit him all right for a son-in-law. He and I agree on that. And this country ain't like the places you read about in your story books—it's a man's country. Oh, I know you well enough. It's time you got down to brass tacks. If you're going to be a northern woman, you've got to be content with the kind of men that grow up here. Up here, the best man wins, the hardest, strongest man. That's why I'm going to win you."

Because he was secretly attacking her dreams, the dearest part of her being, she felt the first surge of rising anger.

"You're not the best man here," she told him, straightening. "If you were, I'd move out. You may be the strongest in your body, and certainly the hardest, going further to get your own way—but a real man would break you in two in a minute. Some one more than a brute to beat horses to death and jump claims. I'm going in now. Please take away your hand."



“One thing more. This is the North. We do things in a man’s way up here—not a story-book way. The strong man gets what he wants—and I want you. And I’ll get you, too—just like I get this kiss.”

He suddenly snatched her toward him. A powerful man; she was wholly helpless in his grasp. His arms went about her and he pressed his lips to hers—three times. Then he released her, his eyes glowing like red coals.

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But she was a northern girl, trained to self-defense. As he freed her, her strong, slender arm swung out and up—with really startling force. Her half-closed hand struck with a sharp, drawing motion across his lips, a blow that extinguished his laughter as the wind extinguishes a match-blaze.

“You little—devil!”

The tempest of the forest was upon her, and her eyes blazed as she hastened around the house.

V

Jeffery Neilson and Chan Heminway were already in session when Ray Brent, his face flushed and his eyes still angry and red, joined them. Neilson was a tall, gaunt man, well past fifty—from his manner evidently the leader of the three. He had heavy, grizzled brows and rather quiet eyes, a man of deep passions and great resolve. Yet his lean face had nothing of the wickedness of Brent’s. There had evidently been some gentling, redeeming influence in his life, and although it was not in the ascendancy, it had softened his smile and the hard lines about his lips. Notorious as he was through the northern provinces he was infinitely to be preferred to Chan Heminway, who sat at his left who, a weaker man than either Ray or Neilson, was simply a tool in the latter’s hand,—a smashing sledge or a cruel blade as his master wished. He was vicious without strength, brutal without self-control. Locks of his blond hair, unkempt, dropped over his low forehead into his eyes.

“Where’s Beatrice?” Neilson asked at once. “I thought I heard her voice.”

Ray searched for a reply, and in the silence all three heard the girl’s tread as she went around the house. “She’s going in the back door. Likely she didn’t want to disturb us.”

Ray looked up to find Neilson’s eyes firmly fixed upon his face. Try hard as he might he couldn’t restrain a surge of color in his cheeks. “Yes, and what’s the rest of it?” Neilson asked.

“Nothing—I know of.”

“You’ve got some white marks on your cheeks—where it ain’t red. The kid can slap, can’t she—”

Ray flushed deeper, but the lines of Neilson’s face began to deepen and draw. Then his voice broke in a great, hearty chuckle. He had evidently tried to restrain it—but it got away from him at last. No man could look at him, his twinkling eyes and his joyous face, and doubt but that this soft-eyed, strong-handed daughter of his was the joy and pride of his life. He had heard the ringing slap through the ramshackle walls of the

house, and for all that he favored Ray as his daughter's suitor, the independence and spirit behind the action had delighted him to the core.

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But Ray's sense of humor did not run along these lines. The first danger signal of rising anger leaped like a little, hot spark into his eyes. Many times before Ray had been obliged to curb his wrath against Neilson: to-night he found it more difficult than ever. The time would come, he felt, when he would no longer be obliged to submit to Neilson's dictation. Sometime the situation would be reversed; he would be leader instead of underling, taking the lion's share of the profit of their enterprises instead of the left-overs, and when that time came he would not be obliged to endure Neilson's jests in silence. Neilson himself, as he eyed the stiffening figure, had no realization of Ray's true attitude toward him. He thought him a willing helper, a loyal partner, and he would not have sat with such content in his chair if he could have beheld the smoldering fires of jealousy and ambition in the other's breasts. The time would come when Ray would assert himself, he thought—when Beatrice was safe in his hands.

"It may seem like a joke to you, but it doesn't to me," he answered shortly. Nor was he able to keep his anger entirely from his voice. "Everything that girl does you think is perfect. Instead of encouraging her in her meanness you ought to help me out." His tones harshened, and he lost the fine edge of his self-control. "I've stood enough nonsense from that little—"

Seemingly, Neilson made no perceptible movement in his chair. What change there was showed merely in the lines of his face, and particularly in the light that dwelt in the gray, straightforward eyes. "Don't finish it," he ordered simply.

For an instant eyes met eyes in bitter hatred—and Chan Heminway began to wonder just where he would seek cover in case matters got to a shooting stage. But Ray's gaze broke before that of his leader. "I'm not going to say anything I shouldn't," he protested sullenly. "But this doesn't look like you're helping out my case any. You told me you'd do everything you could for me. You even went so far as to say you'd take matters in your own hands—"

"And I will, in reason. I'm keeping away the rest of the boys so you can have a chance. But if you think I'm going to tie her up to anybody against her will, you're barking up the wrong tree. She's my daughter, and her happiness happens to be my first object." Then his voice changed, good-humored again. "But cool down, boy—wait till you hear everything I've got to tell you, and you'll feel better. Of course, you know what it's about —"

"I suppose—Hiram Melville's claim."

"That's it. Of course we don't know that he had a claim—but he had a pocket full of the most beautiful nuggets you ever want to see. No one knows that fact but me—I saw 'em by accident—and I got 'em now. You know he's always had an idea that the Yuga country was worth prospecting, but we always laughed at him. Of course it is a pocket

country; but it's my opinion he found a pocket that would make many a placer look sick, before he died."

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“But he might have got the nuggets somewheres else—”

“Hold your horses. Where would he get ‘em? There’s something else suspicious too. He wrote a letter, the day before he died, and addressed it to Ezra Melville, somewhere in Oregon. He must just about got it by now—maybe a few days ago. He had the clerk mail it for him, and got him to witness it, saying it was his will—and what did that old hound have to will except a mine? Next day he wrote another letter somewhere too—but I didn’t find out who it was to. If I’d had any gumption I’d got ahold of ‘em both. The point is—I’m convinced it’s worth a trip, at least.”

“I should say it was worth a trip,” Ray agreed. “And a fast one, too. There might be some competition—”

“There won’t be a rush, if that’s what you mean. Everybody knows it’s a pocket country, and the men in this town wouldn’t any more get excited about the Yuga River—”

“True enough—but that Ezra Melville will be showin’ up one of these days. We want to be settin’ pretty when he comes.”

“You’ve got the idea. It ought to be the easiest job we ever did. It’s my idea he had his claim all laid out, monuments up and everything, and was on his way down to Bradleyburg to record it when he died. He just went out before he could make the rest of the trip. All we’ll have to do is go up there, locate in his cabin, and sit tight.”

“Wait just a second.” Ray was lost in thought. “There’s an old cabin up that way somewhere—along that still place—on the river. It was a trapping cabin belonging to old Bill Foulks.”

“That’s true enough—but it likely ain’t near his mine. Boys, it’s a clean, open-and-shut job—with absolutely nothing to interfere. If his brother does come up, he’ll find us in possession—and nothing to do but go back. So to-morrow we’ll load up and pack horses and light out.”

“Up Poor Man creek, through Spruce Pass—”

“Sure. Then over to the Yuga. Old Hiram was hunting down some kind of a scent in the vicinity of that old cabin you speak of, last heard of him. And I wouldn’t be surprised, on second thought, if it wasn’t his base of operations.”

“All easy enough,” Ray agreed. He paused, and a queer, speculative look came into his wild-beast’s eyes. “But what I don’t see—how you can figure all this is going to help me out with Beatrice.”

Jeffery Neilson turned in his chair. “You can’t, eh? You need spectacles. Just think a minute—say you had fifty or sixty thousand all your own—to spend on a wife and buy

her clothes and automobiles. Don't you think that would make you more attractive to the feminine eye?"

At first Ray made no apparent answer. He merely sat staring ahead. But plainly the words had wakened riot in his imagination. Such a sum meant *wealth*, the power his ambitious nature had always craved, idleness and the gratification of all his lusts. He was no stranger to greed, this degenerate son of the North. "It'd help some," he admitted in a low voice. "But what makes you think it would be worth that much?"

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"Because old Hiram talked a little, half-delirious, before he died. 'A quarter of a million,' he kept saying. 'Right there in sight—a quarter of a million.' If he really found that much stowed away in the rocks, that's fifty or sixty apiece for you and Chan."

Ray's mind worked swiftly. Sixty thousand apiece—and that left one hundred and thirty thousand for their leader's portion. The old rage and jealousy that had preyed upon his mind so long swept over him, more compelling than ever. "Go on," he urged. "What's the rest of it?"

"The second thing is—we'll need some one to cook, and look after us, when we get up there. Who should it be but Beatrice? She wouldn't want to stay here; you know how she loves the woods. And if you know anything about girls, you know that nothing counts like having 'em alone. There wouldn't be any of the other boys up there to trouble you. You'd have a clear field."

Ray's dark eyes shone. "It'd help some," he admitted. "That means—hunt up an extra horse for her to-morrow."

"No. I don't intend she should come up now. Not till we're settled."

"Why not?"

"Think a minute, and you'll see why not. You know how she regards this business of jumping claims. She's dead against it if any one could be—bless her heart!"

"Don't go getting sentimental, Neilson."

"And don't let that mouth of yours get you into trouble, either." Once more their eyes locked: once more Ray looked away. "I hope she'll always stay that way, too. As I say, she's dead against it, and she's been a little suspicious ever since that Jenkins deal. Besides, it wouldn't be any pleasure for her until we find a claim and get settled. When she comes up we'll be established in a couple of cabins—one for her and me and one for you two—and she won't know but that we made the original find."

"How will she know just where to find us?"

"We're bound to be somewhere near that old cabin on the Yuga. We'll set a date for her to come, and I can meet her there."

It was, Ray was forced to admit, a highly commendable scheme. He sat back, contemplating all its phases. "It's slick enough," he agreed. "It ought to do the trick."

But if he had known the girl's thoughts, as she sat alone in the back part of the house, he wouldn't have felt so confident. She was watching the moon over the spruce forest, and she was thinking, with repugnance in her heart, of the indignity to which she had

been subjected at her father's door. Yet the kisses Ray had forced on her were no worse than his blasphemy of her dreams. The spirit of romance was abroad to-night—in the enchantment of the moon—and she was wistful and imaginative as never before. This was just the normal expression of her starved girlhood—the same childlike wistfulness with which a Cinderella might long for her prince—just as natural and as wholesome and as much a part of youth as laughter and happiness.

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"I won't believe him, I won't believe him," she told herself. Her thought turned to other channels, and her heart spoke its wish. "Wherever he is—sometime he'll come to me."

VI

At a little town at the end of steel Ben and Ezram ended the first lap of their journey. They had had good traveling these past days. Steadily they had gone north, through the tilled lands of Northern Washington, through the fertile valleys of lower British Columbia, traversing great mountain ranges and penetrating gloomy forests, and now had come to the bank of a north-flowing river,—a veritable flood and one of the monarch rivers of the North. Every hour their companionship had been more close and their hopes higher. Every waking moment Ben had been swept with thankfulness for the chance that had come to him.

They had worked for their meals and passage—hard, manual toil—but it had seemed only play to them both. Sometimes they mended fence, sometimes helped at farm labor, and one gala morning, with entire good will and cheer, they beat into cleanliness every carpet in a widow's cottage. And the sign of the outcast was fading from Ben's flesh.

The change was marked in his face. His eye seemed more clear and steadfast, his lips more firm, the lines of his face were not so hard and deep. His fellows of the underworld would have scarcely known him now,—his lips and chin darkening with beard and this new air of self-respect upon him. Perhaps they had forgotten him, but it was no less than he had done to them. The prison walls seemed already as if they hadn't been true. He loved every minute of the journey, freshness instead of filth, freedom instead of confinement, fragrant fields and blossoming flowers. Ever the stars and the moon, remembered of old, yielded him a peace and happiness beyond his power to tell. And his gratitude to Ezram grew apace.

Besides self-confidence and the constant, slow unraveling of his memory problems, each day yielded rich gifts: no less than added trust in each other. Always they found each other steadfast, utterly to be relied upon. Ezram never regretted for a moment his offer to Ben. The young man had seemingly developed under his eye and was a real aid to him in all the problems of the journey.

As the days passed, the whole tone and key of the land had seemed to change. They were full in the mountains now, snow gleaming on the heights, forests blue-black on the slopes; and Ben's response was a growing excitement that at first he could not analyze. The air was sweeter, more bracing, and sometimes he discerned a fleeting, delicate odor that drew him up short in his talk and held him entranced. There was a sparkle and stir in the air, unknown in the cities he had left; and to breathe it deeply thrilled him with an unexplainable happiness.

Some way it was all familiar, all dear to him as if it had once been close to his life. The sparkle in the air was not new, only recalled: long and long ago he had wakened to find just such a delicate fragrance in his nostrils. But the key hadn't come to him yet. His memory pictures were ever stronger of outline, clearer in his mind's eye, yet they were still too dim for him to interpret them. In these days Ezram watched him closely, with a curious, intense interest.

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It was no longer pleasant to sleep out in the hay. For the sake of warmth alone they were obliged to hire their night's lodging at cheap hotels. Spring was full in the land they had left: it was just beginning here. The mountains, visible from the village of Saltsville where they left the railroad, were still swept with snow.

Ben felt that he would have liked to take a day off at this point and venture with his companion into the high, wooded hills that fronted the town, but he agreed with Ezram that they could not spare the time. They swiftly made preparations for their journey down-river. A canoe was bought for a reasonable sum—they were told they had a good chance of selling it again when they left the river near Snowy Gulch—and at the general store they bought an axe, rudimentary fishing tackle, tobacco, blankets, and all manner of simpler provisions, such as flour, rice, bacon, coffee, canned milk, and sugar. And for a ridiculously small sum which he mysteriously produced from the pocket of his faded jeans Ezram bought a second-hand rifle—an ancient gun of large caliber but of enduring quality—and a box of shells to match.

“Old Hiram left me a gun, but we'll each need one,” Ezram explained. “And they tell me there's a chance to pick up game, like as not, goin' down the river.”

They would have need of good canoe-craft before the journey's end, the villagers told them. Ezram had not boasted of any such ability, and at first Ben regarded the plan with considerable misgivings. And it was with the most profound amazement that, when they pushed off, he saw Ezram deliberately seat himself in the bow, leaving the more important place to his young companion.

“Good heavens, I'll capsize you in a minute,” Ben said. “How do you dare risk it——”

“Push off and stop botherin' me,” Ezram answered. “There's a paddle—go ahead and shoot 'er.”

The waters caught the canoe, speeding it downstream; and in apprehension of immediate disaster Ben seized the paddle. Swiftly he thrust it into the streaming water at his side.

He was not further aware of Ezram's searching gaze. He did not know of the old man's delight at the entire incident—first the anxious, hurried stroke of the paddle, then the movement of Ben's long fingers as he caught a new hold, finally the white flame of exultation that came into his face. For himself, Ben instantly knew that this was his own sphere. He suddenly found himself an absolute master of his craft: at the touch of the paddle controlling it as a master mechanic controls a delicate machine.

The white waters were no more to be feared. He found that he knew, as if by instinct, every trick of the riverman's trade,—the slow stroke, the fast stroke, the best stroke for a long day's sail, the little half-turn in his hands that put the blade on edge in the water

and gave him the finest control. It was all so familiar, so unspeakably dear to him. Clear, bright memories hovered close to him, almost within his grasp.

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“Do you remember when you shot the Athabaska Rapids?” Ezram had asked. It was all clear enough. In that life that was forgotten he had evidently lived much in a canoe, knowing every detail of river life. Perhaps he had been a master canoeist; at least he felt a strange, surging sense of self-confidence and power. He understood, now, why the image of rushing waters had come so often into his dreams. Dim pictures of river scenes—cataracts white with foam, rapids with thunderous voices, perilous eddies, and then, just beyond, glassy waters where the shadow of the canoe was unbroken in the blue depths—streamed through his mind, but they were not yet bright enough for him to seize and hold.

He enjoyed the first few hours of paddling, but in the long, warm afternoon came indolence, and they were both willing to glide with the current and watch the ever-changing vista of the shore. For the first time since they had come into the real North, Ben found opportunity to observe and study the country.

Already they were out of sight of the last vestige of a habitation; and the evergreen forests pushed down to the water’s edge. From the middle of the stream the woods appeared only as a dark wall, but this was immeasurably fascinating to Ben. It suggested mystery, adventure; yet its deeper appeal, the thing that stirred him and thrilled him to the quick, he could neither understand nor analyze.

Sometimes a little clump of trees stood apart, and from their shape he identified them as the incomparable spruce, perhaps the most distinguished and beautiful of all the evergreens. He marked their great height, their slender forms, their dark foliage that ever seemed to be silvered with frost; and they seemed to him to answer, to the fullest extent, some vague expectation of which he had scarcely been aware.

The wild life of the river filled him with speechless delight. Sometimes he saw the waters break and gleam at the leap of a mighty salmon—the king fish of the North on his spring rush to the headwaters where he would spawn and die—and often the canoe sent flocks of waterfowl into flight. Ben dimly felt that on the tree-clad shores larger, more glorious living creatures were standing, hiding, watching the canoe glide past. The thought thrilled him.

Late afternoon, and they worked closer to the shore. They were watching for a place to land. But because the shadows of twilight were already falling, the forest itself was hardly more vivid to their eyes. Once it seemed to Ben that he saw the underbrush move and waver at the water’s edge, and his heart leaped; but whatever stirred kept itself concealed. And now, in the gray of twilight, Ezram saw the place to land.

It was a small lagoon into which a creek emptied, and beyond was an open meadow, found so often and so unexpectedly in the North woods. Swiftly Ben turned the canoe into shore.

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Ezram climbed out and made fast, and so busy was he with his work that he did not glance at Ben, otherwise he might have beheld a phenomenon that would have been of keen interest to the alienist, Forest. His young charge had suddenly grown quite pale. Ben himself was neither aware of this nor of the fact that his heart was hammering wildly in his breast and his blood racing, like wild rivers, through his veins: he was only thrilled and held by a sense of vast, impending developments. Every nerve tingled and thrilled, and why he did not know.

Ezram began to unload; but now, his blue eyes shining, he began a covert watch of his young companion. He saw the man from prison suddenly catch his breath in inexpressible awe and his eye kindle with a light of unknown source. A great question was shaping itself in Ben's mind, but as yet he could not find the answer.

All at once Ben knew this place. Here was nothing strange or new: it was all as he had known it would be in his inmost heart. All of it spoke to him with familiar voice, seemingly to welcome him as a son is welcomed after long absence. There was nothing here that had not been known and beloved of old. Vivid memories, bright as lightning, swept through him.

He had always known this wholesome, sweet breath that swept into his face. It was merely that of the outdoors, the open places that were his own haunts. It was wholly fitting and true that the silence should lie over the dark spruce that ringed about him, a silence that, in its infinite harmony with some queer mood of silence in his own heart, was more moving than any voice. All was as he had secretly known: the hushed tree aisles, the gray radiance—soft as a hand upon the brow—of the afterglow; the all-pervading health and peace of the wilderness. Except for an old and trusted companion, he was alone with it all, and that too was as it should be. Just he and the forest, his companion and the gliding river.

He didn't try to understand, at first, the joy and the wonder that thrilled him, nor could he speak aloud the thoughts that came to him. Ravished and mystified, he walked softly to the dark, still edge of the forest, penetrated it a distance, then sat down to wait.

For the first time in years, it seemed to him, he was at peace. A strange sense of self-realization—lost to him in his years of exile—climbed like fire through him; and with it the return of a lost virility, a supreme vigor tingling each little nerve; a sense of strength and power that was almost blinding.

He sat still. He saw the twilight descending, ever heavier, over the forest. The sharp edges of the individual trees faded and blended, the trunks blurred. He turned one fleeting glance of infinite, inexpressible gratitude toward Ezram—the man who had brought him here and who now was busily engaged in unpacking the canoe and making camp—then looked back to his forests. The wind brought the wood smells,—spruce

and moldering earth and a thousand more no man could name. The great, watchful, brooding spirit of the forest went in to him.

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All at once his heart seemed to pause in his breast. He was listening,—for what he did not know. His eyes strained into the shadows. Brush wavered, a twig cracked with a miniature explosion. And then two figures emerged into the beaver meadow opposite him.

They were only creatures of the wild, an old cow moose, black and ungainly, and her long-legged, awkward calf. Yet they supplied the detail that was missing. They were the one thing needed to complete the picture—the crowning touch that revealed this land as it was—the virgin wilderness where the creatures of the wild still held full sway.

But it did more. All at once a great clarity seemed to take possession of his mind. Here, in these dark forests, were the *stimuli* of which Forest, the alienist, had spoken; and his brain seemed to leap, as in one impulse, to the truth. Suddenly he knew the answer to all the questions and problems that had troubled him so long.

Many times, in the past years, he had seen logs jammed in the water, a veritable labyrinth that defied dissolution. Suddenly, as if by magic, the key log would be ejected, and the whole jam would break, shatter down in one stupendous crash, settle and dissolve, leaving at last only drift logs floating quietly in the river. Thus it was with the confusion in his brain. All at once it seemed to dissolve, the tangled skeins straightened out, the association areas of his mind stirred full into life once more. As he sat there, pale as the twilight sky, the mists of amnesia lifted from him. He was cured as if by the touch of a holy man.

No wonder these forests depths were familiar. His boyhood and early manhood, clear until the vortex of war had engulfed him, had been spent amid just such surroundings, in just such silences, on the banks of just such wilderness rivers. The same sky line of dark, heaven-reaching spruce had fronted him of old. He sprang up, his eyes blazing. “I remember everything,” an inaudible voice spoke within him. Then he whispered, fervently, to his familiar wilds. “And I have come home.”

VII

Everything was as it should be, as he and Ezram made the camp. He himself cut the boughs for their beds, laid them with his remembered skill, spread the blankets, and kept the fire blazing while Ezram cooked; afterwards he knew the indescribable peace of a pipe smoke beside the glowing coals. He saw the moon come up at last, translating the spruce forest into a fairy land.

Of course he had remembered the moon. How many times had he watched for its argent gleam on the sky line, the vivid, detailed silhouette of the spruce against it; and then its slow-spreading glory through the still, dark forests! The spires of the trees grew

ensilvered, as always; immense nebulous patches lay between the trunks, shadows stole mysteriously, phantoms met, lingered, and vanished.

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This was his own North! The stir and vigor in the very air told him that. This was the land he had dreamed of, under the moon; the primeval forests that had tried him, tested him, staked their cruel might against him, but yet had blessed him with their infinite beneficence and hospitality. It was ever somber, yet its dusky beauty stirred him more than any richness he had seen in bright cities. He knew its every mood: ecstasy in spring; gentleness in summer; brooding melancholy in the gray days of fall; remorseless, savage, but unspeakably beautiful in the winter. He felt his old pity for the spring flowers, blossoming so hopefully in this gentle season. How soon they would be covered with many feet of snow!

"It's all come clear again," he told Ezram. And the two men talked over, quietly and happily, old days at Thunder Lake. He remembered now that Ezram had always been the most intimate friend of his own family: a spry old godfather to himself and young sister, a boon companion to his once successful rival, Ben's father. Ben did not wonder, now, at his own perplexity when Forest had spoken of "Wolf" Darby. That was his own name known throughout hundreds of square miles of forest and in dozens of little river hamlets in an Eastern province. Partly the name was in token of his skill as a woodsman and frontiersman, partly in recognition of certain traits that his fellow woodsmen had seen and wondered at in him. It was not an empty nickname, in his case. It was simply that the name suited him.

"The boys had reason a-plenty for callin' you that," Ezram told him. "Up here, as you know, men don't get no complimentary epithets unless they deserve 'em. Some men, Ben, are like weasels. You've seen 'em. You've seen human rats, too. As if the souls they carried around with 'em was the souls of rats. Of course you remember 'Grizzly' Silverdale? Did you ever see any one who in disposition and looks and walk and everything reminded you so much of a grizzly bear? I've known men like sheep, and men with the faithful souls of dogs. You remember when you got in the big fight in the Le Perray bar?"

"I don't think I'll ever forget it again."

"That's the night the name came on you, to stay. You remember how you'd drive into one of them, leap away, then tear into another. Like a wolf for all the world! You was always hard to get into a fight, but you know as well as I do, and I ain't salvin' you when I say it, that you're the most terrible, ferocious fighter, forgettin' everything but blood, that ever paddled a canoe on the Athabaska. Some men, Ben, seem to have the spirit of the wolf right under their skins, a sort of a wild instinct that might have come straight down from the stone age, for all I know. You happen to be one of 'em, the worst I ever saw. Maybe you don't remember, but you took your bull moose before you was thirteen years old."

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Ben sat dreaming. The Athabaska Rapids was not an empty name to him now. He remembered the day he had won the canoe race at Lodge Pole. Other exploits occurred to him,—of brutal, savage brawls in river taverns, of adventures on the trail, of struggling with wild rivers when his canoe capsized, of running the great logs down through white waters. It was his world, these far-stretching wildernesses. And he blessed, with all the fervency of his heart, the man who had brought him home.

He went to his bed, but sleep did not at once come to him. He lay with hushed breathing, listening to the little, secret noises, known so well, of the wilderness night. He heard the wild creatures start forth on their midnight journeys. Once a lynx mewed at the edge of the forest; and he laughed aloud when some large creature—probably a moose—grunted and splashed water in the near-by beaver meadow.

Thus ended the first of a brilliant succession of joyous days, descending the stream in the daylight hours and camping on the bank at night. Every day they plunged deeper into the heart of the wilderness, and every hour Ben felt more at home.

It was only play for him,—to meet and shoot successfully the rapids of the river. In the long stillnesses he paddled hour upon hour, not only to make time but to find an outlet for his surging energy. His old-time woodsman's pleasures were recalled again: shooting waterfowl for their mess in the still dawns, racing the swimming moose when they ran on him in the water. One day, fish hungry, he rigged up the elementary fishing tackle that they had brought from Saltsville and tried for a salmon.

To a long, tough rod cut on the river bank he attached thirty feet of cheap, white cord, and to the cord he fastened a bright spoon hook—the spinner that salmon fishers know. He had no leader, no reel, no delicately balanced salmon rod—and Ezram was full of scorn for the whole proceeding. And it was certainly true that, by all the rules of angling, Ben had no chance whatever to get a bite.

The cord was visible in the clear water, and the spoon itself was scarcely more than twenty feet from the rear of the boat. But this northern stream was not at all like the famous salmon rivers known to sportsmen. In years to come, when the lines of communication are better and tourist hotels are established on its banks, the river may then begin to conform to the qualifications of a conventional fishing stream, and then Ben's crude tackle will be unavailing. But at present the salmon were not so particular. As fishermen came but rarely, the fish were in countless numbers; and in such a galaxy there were bound to be few misguided fish that did not know a sportsman's tackle from a dub's.

The joy of angling, once known, dwells in the body until death, and Ben was a born fisherman. The old delight that can never die crept back to him the instant he felt the clumsy rod in his hands and the faint throb of the line through the delicate mechanism of

his nerves. And apparently for no other reason than that the river hordes wished to welcome him home, almost at once a gigantic bull salmon took his spoon.

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Ezram's first knowledge of it was a wild yell that almost startled him over the side—the same violent outcry that old anglers still can not restrain when the fish takes hold, even after a lifetime of angling. When he recovered himself he looked to see Ben kneeling frantically in the stern, hanging for dear life to his rod and seemingly in grave danger of being pulled overboard.

No man who has felt that first, overpowering jolt of a striking salmon can question the rapture of that first moment. The jolt carried through all the intricacies of the nerves, jarred the soul within the man, and seemingly registered in the germ plasm itself an impression that could be recalled, in dreams, ten generations hence. Fortunately the pole withstood that first, frantic rush, and then things began to happen in earnest.

The great trout seemed to dance on the surface of the water. He tugged, he swam in frantic circles, he flopped and darted and sulked and rushed and leaped. If he hadn't been securely hooked, and if it had not been for a skill earned in a hundred such battles, Ben would not have held him a moment.

But the time came at last, after a sublime half-hour, when his steam began to die. His rushes were less powerful, and often he hung like a dead weight on the line. Slowly Ben worked him in, not daring to believe that he was conquering, willing to sell his soul for the privilege of seeing the great fish safe in the boat. His eyes protruded, perspiration gleamed on his brow, he talked foolishly and incessantly to Ezram, the fish, the river-gods, and himself. Ezram, something of an old Isaac Walton himself, managed the canoe with unusual dexterity and chuckled in the contagion of Ben's delight. And lo—in a moment more the thing was done.

"You'd think you never had a rod in your hand before," Ezram commented in mock disgust. "Such hollerin' and whoopin' I never heard."

Ben grinned widely. "That's fishing—the sport that keeps a man an amateur all his days—with an amateur's delight." His vivid smile quivered at his lips and was still. "That's why I love the North; it can never, never grow old. You're just as excited at the close as at the beginning. Ezram, old man, it's life!"

Ezram nodded. Perhaps, in the moment's fire, Ben had touched at the truth. Perhaps *life*, in its fullest sense, is something more than being born, breathing air, consuming food, and moving the lips in speech. *Life* is a thing that wilderness creatures know, realized only when the blood, leaping red, sweeps away lifeless and palsied tissue and builds a more sentient structure in its place; invoked by such forces as adventure and danger and battle and triumph. For the past half-hour Ben had lived in the fullest sense, and Ezram was a little touched by the look of unspeakable gratitude with which his young companion regarded him.



But the journey ended at last. They saw the white peak they had been told to watch for, and soon after they came to a green bank from which the forest had been cut away. Softly, rather regretfully, they pushed up and made landing on the banks of a small stream, tributary to the great river, that marked the end of the water route.

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This stream, Ezram knew, was Poor Man's Creek, the stream of which his brother had written and which they must ascend to reach Spruce Pass. Only five miles distant, in a quartering direction from the river, was Snowy Gulch, the village where they were to secure supplies and, from Steve Morris, the late Hiram's gun and his pet, Fenris.

For a time, at least, they had left the utter solitudes of the wild. Men had cut away the forest and had built a crude wagon road to Snowy Gulch. And before they were fully unpacked they made out the figure of a middle-aged frontiersman, his back loaded, advancing up the road toward them.

Both men knew something of the ways of the frontier and turned in greeting. "Howdy," Ezram began pleasantly.

"Howdy," the stranger replied. "How was goin'?"

"Oh, good enough."

"Come all the way from Saltsville?"

"Yes. Goin' to Snowy Gulch."

"It's only five miles, up this road," the stranger ventured. "I'm goin' up Saltsville way myself, but I won't have no river to tow me. I've got to do my own paddlin'. Thank the lord I'm only goin' a small part of the way."

"You ain't goin' to swim, are you? Where's your boat."

"My pard's got an old craft, and he and I are goin' to pack it out next trip." The stranger paused, blinking his eyes. "Say, partners—you don't want to sell your boat, do you?"

Ben started to speak, but the doubtful look on Ezram's face checked him. "Oh, I don't know," the old man replied, in the discouraging tones of a born tradesman. In reality the old Shylock's heart was leaping gayly in his breast. This was almost too good to be true: a purchaser for the boat in the first hour. "Yet we might," he went on. "We was countin' on goin' back in it soon."

"I'd just as leave buy it, if you want to sell it. In this jerked-off town there ain't a fit canoe to be had. Our boat is the worst tub you ever seen. How much you want for it?"

Ezram stated his figure, and Ben was prone to believe that he had adopted a highwayman for a buddy. The amount named was nearly twice that which they had paid. And to his vast amazement the stranger accepted the offer in his next breath.

"It's worth something to bring it up here, you dub," Ezram informed his young partner, when the latter accused him of profiteering.

After the sale was made Ezram and the stranger soon got on the intimate terms that almost invariably follow a mutually satisfactory business deal, and in the talk that ensued the old man learned a fact of the most vital importance to their venture. And it came like a bolt from the blue.

“So you don’t know any folks in Snowy Gulch, then?” the stranger had asked politely. “But you’ll get acquainted soon enough—”

“I’ve got a letter to a feller named Morris,” Ezram replied. “And I’ve heard of one or two more men too—Jeffery Neilson was one of ’em—”

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"You'll find Morris in town all right," the stranger ventured to assure him. "He lives right next to Neilson's. And—say—what do you know about this man Neilson?"

"Oh, nothin' at all. Why?"

"If you fellows is prospectin', Jeffery Neilson is a first-class man to stay away from—and his understrappers, too—Ray Brent and Chan Heminway. But they're out of town right now. They skinned out all in a bunch a few weeks ago—and I can't tell you what kind of a scent they got."

Ezram felt cold to the marrow of his bones. He glanced covertly at Ben; fortunately his partner was busy among the supplies and was not listening to this conversation. Yet likely enough it was a false alarm! Doubtless the ugly possibility that occurred to him had no justification whatever in fact. Nevertheless, he couldn't restrain the question that was at his lips.

"You don't know where they went, do you?" he asked.

"Not exactly. They took up this creek here a ways, through Spruce Pass, and over to Yuga River—the country that kind of a crazy old chap named Hiram Melville, who died here a few weeks ago, has always prospected."

The stranger marvelled that his old listener should have suddenly gone quite pale.

VIII

Ezram had only a moment's further conversation with his new friend. He put two or three questions—in a rather curious, hushed voice—and got his answer. Yes, it was true that the shortest way to go to the Yuga River was to follow up the creek by which he was now standing. It was only out of the way to go into Snowy Gulch: they would have to come back to this very point. And yes, a pedestrian, carrying a light pack, could make much better time than a horseman with pack animals. The horses could go no faster than a walk, and the time required to sling packs and care for the animals cut down the day's march by half.

These things learned, Ezram strolled over to his young partner. And at that moment he revealed the possession of a talent that neither he nor any of his friends had ever suspected. The stage had lost an artist of no mean ability when Ezra Melville had taken to the cattle business. Outwardly, to the last, little lines about his lips and eyes, he was his genial, optimistic, droll old self. His eye twinkled, his face beamed in the gray stubble, his voice was rollicking with the fun of life the same as ever. And like Pagliacci in his masque there was not the slightest exterior sign of the fear and despair that chilled his heart.

“What have you and your poor victim been talking about, all this time?” Ben asked.

“Oh, just a gab-fest—a tat-i-tat as you’d call it. But you know, Ben, I’ve got a idea all a-sudden.” Ben straightened, lighted his pipe, and prepared to listen.

“This old boy tells me that we’d save just twelve miles by striking off front here, instead of goin’ into town. Snowy Gulch is six miles, and we have to come back to this very place. What’s the use of goin’ into town at all?”

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"Good heavens, Ez? Have you forgotten we've got to get supplies? And your brother's gun—and his dog?"

"How do you know he's got a dog?"

"He said a pup, didn't he? But it may be an elephant for all I know. Of course, we've got to go on in."

"Yes, I know—one of us has. But, Ben, it seems to me that one of us ought to strike off now and figure out the way and sort of get located. One of us could take a little food and a couple of blankets and make it through in less than a day. Half a day, almost. Then we could have the cabin all ready, and everything laid out for to begin work. He could blaze any dim spots in the trail and save time for the other feller, comin' with the horses."

"Oh, it would be all right," Ben began rather doubtfully. "I don't see that much is to be gained by it. But I'll strike off on foot, if you want me to."

Ezram's mind was flashing with thoughts like lightning, and his answer was ready.

"Ben, if you don't mind, I'll do that," he said. "I can get along without gazin' at the skyscrapers of Snowy Gulch, and to tell the truth, that twelve miles of extra walkin' don't appeal to me one bit. I'd as soon have you tend to all the things in town."

"But you'd get a ride, if you waited—"

"I hate a horse, anyway—"

"You've surely changed a lot since the war."

"I was thrown off not long ago—and have been leery of the dum things ever since. I'd walk, sooner than ride, even if I did have a horse. So you roll me that big Hudson Bay blanket and give me a couple of day's rations. I'll make a pack for my back that I can't feel. Then you strike off into town."

Without especial enthusiasm Ben agreed. Ezram gave a great sigh of satisfaction. He had put through the deal: Ben's secret thought was that Ezram's curiosity—always a pronounced trait with the old—had mastered him, and he could not wait longer to explore the mine. Not one glimpse of the truth as to Ezram's real reason for desiring to push on alone as much as occurred to him.

Ezram was wholly deliberate. He knew what waited him on arrival at his brother's claim. Jeffery Neilson and his gang had assembled there, had already jumped the claim just as his brother had warned him that they would do; and coolly and quietly he had resolved to face them alone. They were desperate men, not likely to be driven from

the gold by threats or persuasion only. But there was no law in his life, no precept in his code, whereby he could subject his young partner to the risk.

It was true that the desire to arrive on the scene at the earliest possible moment had been a factor in his decision. One of them could hurry on, unimpeded by the pack animals, and the other must linger to secure their supplies; and there could really be no question, in Ezram's mind, which should go and which should stay. He had known perfectly that if Ben had realized the true need for haste, he would never have submitted so tamely to Ezram's will. The old man knew Wolf Darby. The strong dark eyes in the lean, raw-boned face reassured him as to this knowledge. Ben would go too, if he knew the truth. Likely he would insist on going alone.

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Ezram had decided the whole thing in a flash, realizing that a lone pedestrian would be practically as effective in dealing with the usurpers as two horsemen, impeded by the pack animals. If they didn't shoot to kill at first sight of him Ezram would have time in plenty to seek refuge in the forest and do a sharpshooter's business that would fill his old heart with joy. And there really wasn't any question as to which of the two should go. Their partnership was of long duration; their comradeship was deep; Ben was young, and Ezram himself was old!

Ezram made his decision entirely casually, and he would have been surprised out of his wits if any one had expressed wonder of it. He knew no self-pity or sentimentality, only the knowledge that he did not desire that his young buddy should be shot full of holes in the first moment of play. The only fear that had visited him was that Ben might catch on and not let him go. And now he could scarcely restrain his triumphant chuckles in Ben's hearing.

Fie made his pack—a few simple provisions wrapped in his blanket—and a knife and camp axe swung on his belt. He took his trusted pipe—because he knew well that he could never acquit himself creditably in a fight without a few lungfuls of tobacco smoke first—and he also took his rifle. “You'll be gettin' my brother's gun when you get to Snowy Gulch,” he explained, “and I may see game on the way out. And you keep this copy of the letter.” He handed Ben the copy he had made of Hiram's will. “I'm the worst hand for losin' things you ever seen.”

“You're sure you've got the directions straight?”

“Sure.—And I guess that's all.”

They said their simple good-bys, shaking hands over a pile of stores. “I've only got one decent place to keep things safe,” Ezra confided, “and that ain't so all-fired decent, either. When I get any papers that are extra precious, I always stick 'em down the leg of these high old boots, between the sock and the leather. But it's too much work to take the boot off now, so you keep the letter.”

“I suppose you've got a million-dollar bank note hidden down there now,” Ben remarked.

“No, not a cent. Just the same, if ever I get shuffled off all of a sudden—rollin' down one of these mountains, say—I want you to look there mighty careful. There may be a document or two of importance—letter to my old home, and all that.”

“I won't forget,” Ben promised.

“See that you don't.” They shook hands again, lightly and happily. “So good-by, son, and—*take keer of yerself!*”

The old man turned away, and soon his withered figure vanished into the thickets farther up the river. He was following a fairly well-worn moose trail, and he went swiftly. Soon he was out of hearing of the sound of the great river.

Then the little woods people—marten and ermine and rodent and such other small forest creatures that—who can say?—might watch with exceeding interest the travelers on the trails, could have thought that old Ezram was already fatigued. He sat down beside a tree and drew a soiled sheet of paper from his pocket. Searching further he found then the stub of a pencil. Then he wrote.

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Having written he unlaced his boot on the right foot, folded the paper, and thrust it into the bootleg. Then, relacing the shoe, he arose and journeyed blithely on.

IX

On arriving in Snowy Gulch, Ben's first efforts were to inquire in regard to horses. Both pack and saddle animals, he learned, were to be hired of Sandy McClurg, the owner of the general store and leading citizen of the village; and at once he made his way to confer with him.

"Most of my mustangs are rented out," the merchant informed him when they met in the rear of the general store, "but if you can get along with three, I guess I can fix you up. You can pack two of 'em, and ride the third."

"Good enough," Ben agreed. "And after I once get in, I'd like to turn back two of them, and maybe all three—to save the hire and the bother of taking care of them. I suppose, after the fashion of cayuses, they'll leg it right home."

"Just a little faster than a dog. Horses don't much care to grub their food out of them spruce forests. They're good plugs, so of course I don't want to rent 'em to any one who'll abuse 'em, or take 'em on too hard trips. Where are you heading, if the question's fair?"

"Through Spruce Pass and down into the Yuga River."

"Prospecting, eh? There's been quite a movement down that way lately, considering it never was anything but a pocket country. By starting early you can make it through in a day. And you said your name was—"

"Darby. Ben Darby."

The merchant opened his eyes. "Not the Ben Darby that took all the prizes at the meet at Lodge Pole—"

Ben's rugged face lit with the brilliancy of his smile. "The same Darby," he admitted.

"Well, well! I hope you'll excuse them remarks about abusing the horses. If I had known who you was, 'Wolf' Darby, I'd have known you knew how to take care of cayuses. Take 'em for as long as you want, or where you want. And when did you say you was going?"

"First thing to-morrow."

“Well, you’re pretty likely to have companionship on the road, too. There is another party that is going up that way either to-morrow or the day after. Pretty lucky for you.”

“I’m glad of it, if he isn’t a tenderfoot. That must be a pretty thickly settled region—where I’m heading.”

“On the contrary, there’s only three human beings in the whole district—and there’s a thousand of square miles back of it without even one. These three are some men that went up that way prospecting some time ago, and this other party will make four.” He paused, smiling. “Yes, I think you will enjoy this trip to-morrow, after you see who it is. I’d enjoy it, and I’m thirty years older than you are.”

Ben’s thought was elsewhere, and he only half heard. “All right—I’ll be here before dawn to-morrow and get the horses. And now will you tell me—where Steve Morris lives? I’ve got some business with him.”

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“Right up the street—clear to the end of the row.” McClurg’s humor had quite engulfed him by now, and he chuckled again. “And if I was you, I’d stop in the door just this side—and get acquainted with your fellow traveler.”

“What’s his name?” Ben asked.

“The party is named Neilson.”

Unfortunately the name had no mental associations for Ben. It wakened no interest or stirred no memories. He had read the letter the copy of which he carried but once, and evidently the name of the man Ezram had been warned against had made no lasting impression on Ben’s mind.

“All right. Maybe I’ll look him up.”

Ben turned, then made his way up the long, straggly row of unpainted shacks that marked the village street. A few moments later he was standing in the Morris home, facing the one friend that Hiram Melville had possessed on earth.

Ben stated his case simply. He was the partner of Hiram’s brother, he said, and he had been designated to take care of Fenris and such other belongings as Hiram had left. Morris studied his face with the quiet, far-seeing eyes of a woodsman.

“You’ve got means of identification?” he asked.

Ben realized with something of a shock that he had none at all. The letter he carried was merely a copy without Hiram’s signature; besides, he had no desire to reveal its contents. For an instant he was considerably embarrassed. But Morris smiled quietly.

“I guess I won’t ask you for any,” he said. “Hiram didn’t leave anything, far as I know, except his old gun and his pet. Lord knows, I’d let anybody take that pet of his that’s fool enough to say he’s got any claim to him, and you can be sure I ain’t going to dispute his claim.”

“Fenris, then, is,—something of a problem?”

“The worst I ever had. His old gun is a good enough weapon, but I’m willing to trust you with it to get rid of Fenris. If you don’t turn out to be the right man, I’ll dig up for the gun—and feel lucky at that. I won’t be able to furnish another Fenris, though, and I guess nobody’ll be sorry. And if I was you—I’d take him out in a nice quiet place and shoot him.”

He turned, with the intention of securing the gun from an inner room. He did not even reach the door. It was as if both of them were struck motionless, frozen in odd, fixed

attitudes, by a shrill scream for help that penetrated like a bullet the thin walls of the house.

Instinctively both of them recognized it, unmistakably, as the piercing cry of a woman in great distress and terror. It rose surprisingly high, hovered a ghastly instant, and then was almost drowned out and obliterated by another sound, such a sound as left Ben only wondering and appalled.

The sound was in the range between a growl and a bay, instantly identifying itself as the utterance of an animal, rather than a human being. And it was savage and ferocious simply beyond power of words to tell. Ben's first thought was of some enormous, vicious dog, and yet his wood's sense told him that the utterance was not that of a dog. Rather it contained that incredible fierceness and savagery that marks the killing cries of the creatures of the wild.

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He heard it even as he leaped through the door in answer to the scream for aid. His muscles gathered with that mysterious power that had always sustained him in his moments of crisis. He took the steps in one leap, Morris immediately behind him.

"Fenris is loose," he heard the man say. "He'll kill some one——!"

Ben could still hear the savage cries of the animal, seemingly from just behind the adjoining house. A girl's terrified voice still called for help. And deeply appalled by the sounds, Ben wished that the rifle, such a weapon as had been his trust since early boyhood, was ready and loaded in his hands.

He raced about the house; and at once the scene, in every vivid detail, was revealed to him. Pressed back against the wall of a little woodshed that stood behind her house a girl stood at bay,—a dark-eyed girl whose beautiful face was drawn and stark-white with horror. She was screaming for aid, her fascinated gaze held by a gray-black, houndlike creature that crouched, snarling, twenty yards distant.

Evidently the creature was stealing toward her in stealthy advance more like a stalking cat than a frenzied hound. Nor was this creature a hound, in spite of the similarity of outline. Such fearful, lurid surface-lights as all of them saw in its fierce eyes are not characteristic of the soft, brown orbs of the dog, ancient friend to man, but are ever the mark of the wild beast of the forest. The fangs were bared, gleaming in foam, the hair stood erect on the powerful shoulders; and instantly Ben recognized its breed. It was a magnificent specimen of that huge, gaunt runner of the forests, the Northern wolf. Evidently from the black shades of his fur he was partly of the Siberian breed of wolves that beforetime have migrated down on the North American side of Bering Sea.

A chain was attached to the animal's collar, and this in turn to a stake that had been freshly pulled from the ground. This beast was Fenris,—the woods creature that old Hiram Melville had raised from cubdom.

There could be no doubt as to the reality of the girl's peril. The animal was insane with the hunting madness, and he was plainly stalking her, just as his fierce mother might have stalked a fawn, across the young grass. Already he was almost near enough to leap, and the girl's young, strong body could be no defense against the hundred and fifty pounds of wire sinew and lightning muscle that constituted the wolf. The bared fangs need flash but once for such game as this. And yet, after the first, startled glance, Ben Darby felt himself complete master of the situation.

No man could tell him why. No fact of his life would have been harder to explain, no impulse in all his days had had a more inscrutable origin. The realization seemed to spring from some cool, sequestered knowledge hidden deep in his spirit. He knew, in one breathless instant, that he was the master—and that the girl was safe.

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He seemed to know, again, that he had found his ordained sphere. He knew this breed, —this savage, blood-mad, fierce-eyed creature that turned, snarling, at his approach. He had something in common with the breed, knowing their blood-lusts and their mighty moods; and dim, dreamlike memory reminded him that he had mastered them in a long war that went down to the roots of time. Fenris was only a fellow wilderness creature, a pack brother of the dark forests, and he had no further cause for fear.

“Fenris!” he ordered sharply. “Come here!” His voice was commanding and clear above the animal’s snarls.

There followed a curious, long instant of utter silence and infinite suspense. The girl’s scream died on her lips: the wolf stood tense, wholly motionless. Morris, who had drawn his knife and had prepared to leap with magnificent daring upon the wolf, turned with widening eyes, instinctively aware of impending miracle. Ben’s eyes met those of the wolf, commanding and unafraid.

“Down, Fenris,” Ben said again. “Down!”

Then slowly, steadily, Ben moved toward him. Watching unbelieving, Morris saw the fierce eyes begin to lose their fire. The stiff hair on the shoulders fell into place, tense muscle relaxed. He saw in wonder that the animal was trembling all over.

Ben stood beside him now, his hand reaching. “Down, down,” he cautioned quietly. Suddenly the wolf crouched, cowering, at his feet.

X

Ben straightened to find himself under a wondering scrutiny by both Morris and the girl. “Good Lord, Darby!” the former exclaimed. “How did you do it—”

Now that the suspense was over, Ben himself stood smiling, quite at ease. “Can’t say just how. I just felt that I could—I’ve always been able to handle animals. He’s tame, anyway.”

“Tame, is he? You ought to have had to care for him the last few weeks, and you’d think tame. Not once have I dared go in reach of his rope. And there he is, crouched at your feet! I was always dreading he’d get away—” Morris paused, evidently remembering the girl. “Beatrice, are you hurt?”

The girl moved toward them. “No. He didn’t touch me. But you came just in time—” The girl’s voice wavered; and Ben stepped to her side. “I’m all right now—”

“But you’d better sit down,” Ben advised quietly. “It was enough to scare any one to death—”



“Any one—but you—” the girl replied, her voice still unsteady. But she paused when she saw the warm color spread over Ben’s rugged, brown face. And his embarrassment was real. Naturally shy and unassuming, such effusive praise as this always disturbed him—just as it would have embarrassed any really masculine man alive. Women, more extravagant in speech and loving flattery with a higher ardor, would have found it hard to believe how really distressed he was; but Morris, an outdoor man to the core, understood

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completely. Besides, Ben knew that the praise was not deserved. Excessive bravery had played no part in the scene of a moment before. He had been brave just as far as Morris was brave, leaping freely in response to a call for help: the same degree of bravery that can be counted on in most men, over the face of the earth. Bravery does not lie alone in facing danger: there must also be the consciousness of danger, the conquest of fear. In this case Ben had felt no fear. He knew with a sure, true knowledge that he was master of the wolf. He knew the wolf's response to his words before ever he spoke. And now all the words in the language could not convey to these others whence that knowledge had come.

He vaguely realized that this had always been some way part of his destiny,—the imposition of his will over the beasts of the forest. He had never tried to puzzle out why, knowing that such trial would be unavailing. He had instinctively understood such creatures as these. To-day he felt that he knew the wild, fierce heart beating in the lean breast as a man might know his brother's heart. The bond between them was hidden from his sight, something back of him, beyond him, enfolded within a secret self that was mysterious as a dream, and it reached into the countless years; yet it was real, an ancient relationship that was no less intimate because it could not be named. In turn, the wolf had seemed to know that this tall form was a born habitant of the forests, even as himself, one that would kill him as unmercifully as he himself would kill a fall, and whose dark eyes, swept with fire, and whose cool, strong words must never be disobeyed.

"You never seen this wolf before?" Morris asked him, calling him from his reverie.

"Never."

"Then you must be old Hiram's brother himself, to control him like you did. Lord, look at him. Crouching at your feet."

Suddenly Ben reached and took the wolf's head between his hands. Slowly he lifted the savage face till their eyes met. The wolf growled, then, whimpering, tried to avert its gaze. Then a rough tongue lapped at the man's hand.

"There's nothing to be afraid of, now," he told the girl.

"He's right, Beatrice," Morris agreed. "He's tamed him. Even I can see that much. And I never saw anything like it, since the day I was born."

It was true: as far as Ben was concerned, the terrible Fenris—named by a Swedish trapper, acquaintance of Hiram Melville's, for the dreadful wolf of Scandinavian legend—was tamed. He had found a new master; Ben had won a servant and friend whose

loyalty would never waver as long as blood flowed in his veins and breath surged in his lungs. "Lay still, now, Fenris," he ordered. "Don't get up till I tell you."

It seems to be true that as a rule the lower animals catch the meaning of but few words; usually the tone of the voice and the gesture that accompanies it interpret a spoken order in a dog's brain. On this occasion, it was as if Fenris had read his master's thought. He lay supine, his eyes intent on Ben's rugged face.

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And now, for the first time, Ben found himself regarding Beatrice. He could scarcely take his eyes from her face. He knew perfectly that he was staring rudely, but he was without the power to turn his eyes. Her dark eyes fell under his gaze.

The truth was that Ben's life had been singularly untouched by the influence of women. Mostly his life had been spent in the unpeopled forest, away from women of all kinds; and such creatures as had admired him in Seattle's underworld had never got close to him. He had had many dreams; but some way it had never been credible to him that he should ever know womanhood as a source of comradeship and happiness. Love and marriage had always seemed infinitely apart from his wild, adventurous life.

In his days in prison he had given up all dream of this happiness; but now he could begin to dream again. Everything was changed now that he had come home. The girl's regard for him was friendly, even somewhat admiring, and the speculations of ripening womanhood were in her eyes. He returned her gaze with frankest interest and admiration. His senses had been made sharp in his wilderness life; and his respect for her grew apace. She was not only innocent and girlish; she had those traits, innate, that a strong man loves in women: such worth and depth of character as he wishes bequeathed to his children.

Ben drew a long breath. It was good to be home. He had not only found his forests, just as he had left them, but now again he was among the forest people. This girl was of his own breed, not a stranger; her standards were his; she was a woods girl no less than he was a woodsman. It is good to be among one's own people, those who can follow through and understand. She too knew the urge of unbridled vitality and spirit, common to all the woods children; and life's vivid meaning was her inheritance, no less than his. Her arms and lips were warm from fast-flowing blood, her nerves were vibrant and singing like his own. A virgin still, her eyes were tender with the warmheartedness that is such a dominant trait of frontier peoples; but what fire, what passion might burn in them to-morrow! They were dark, lovely eyes, rather somber now in their earnestness, seeming shadowed by the dark shadows of the spruce themselves.

No human face had ever given him such an image of beauty as that of this dark-eyed forest child before him. Yet she was not piquant, demure, like the girls he had met in France; not stylish and sophisticated like those of the great cities he had visited since his return. Her garb became her: simple, not holding the eye in itself but calling attention to the brunette beauty of her throat and face, the warm redness of her childish mouth, and the brown, warm color of her arms. She had dark, waving hair, lovely to touch, wistful red lips. Because he was the woodsman, now and always, he marked with pleasure that there was no indication of ill-health or physical weakness about her. Her body was lithe and strong, with the grace of the wild creatures.

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It would be good to know her, and walk beside her in the tree aisles. All manner of delectable possibilities occurred to him. But all at once he checked his dreams with an iron will.

There must be no thought of women in his life—for now. He still had his way to make. A few hours more would find him plunging deeper into the forest, perhaps never to see her again. He felt an all-pervading sense of regret.

“There’s nothing I can say—to thank you,” the girl was murmuring. “I never saw anything like it; it was just as if the wolf understood every word you said.”

“Old Hiram had him pretty well trained, I suspect.” The man’s eyes fell to the shaggy form at his feet. “I’m glad I happened along Miss—”

“Miss Neilson,” the girl prompted him. “Beatrice Neilson. I live here.”

Neilson! His mind seemed to leap and catch at the name. Just that day he had heard it from the lips of the merchant. And this was the house next door where dwelt his fellow traveler for the morrow.

“Then it’s your father—or brother—who’s going to the Yuga—”

“No,” the girl answered doubtfully. “My father is already there. I’m here alone—”

Then the gray eyes lighted and a smile broke about Ben’s lips. Few times in his life had he smiled in quite this vivid way.

“Then it’s you,” he exulted, “who is going to be my fellow traveler to-morrow!”

XI

Ben found, rather as he had expected, that the girl was not at all embarrassed by the knowledge that they were to have a lonely all-day ride together. She looked at the matter from a perfectly natural and wholesome point of view, and she could see nothing in it amiss or improper. The girls of the frontier rarely feel the need of chaperones. Their womanhood comes early, and the open places and the fresh-life-giving air they breathe give them a healthy confidence in their ability to take care of themselves. Beatrice had a pistol, and she could shoot it like a man. She loved the solitude of the forest, but she also knew it was good to hear the sound of a human voice when journeying the lonely trails.

The frontier had also taught her to judge men. Here foregathered many types, strong-thewed frontiersmen whose reverence for women surpassed, perhaps, that of any other class of men on earth, as well as the most villainous renegades, brutish offspring of the

wilds, but she knew them apart. She realized from the first that this tall woodsman would have only kindness and respect for her; and that he was to be trusted even in those lonely forest depths beyond Spruce Pass.

Ben knew the wild beasts of the field better than he knew women, so her actual reception of the plan was lost to him. He felt that she was not displeased: in reality the delight and anticipation she felt were beyond any power of hers to tell. She had been tremendously thrilled and impressed by his dominance over the wolf. She liked his bright, steady, friendly eyes; because she was a woods girl her heart leaped at the sight of his upright, powerful body; but most of all she felt that he was very near indeed to an ideal come true, a man of terrific strength and prowess yet not without those traits that women love best in men,—courage and character and gentleness.

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"I'm surely glad I'm going to have a companion," he told her. "I won't miss Ez—"

But just then remembrance came to him, cutting the word off short. The letter he carried in his pocket contained certain advice in regard to silence, and perhaps now was a good time to follow it. There was no need to tell the people of Snowy Gulch about Ezram and the claim. He remembered that he had been warned of the danger of claim jumpers.

For an instant his mind seemed to hover at the edge of a more elusive memory; but he could not quite seize upon it. He only knew that it concerned the matter in hand, and that it left him vaguely troubled.

"You were saying," the girl prompted him.

"Nothing very important—except how glad I am you are going my way. The woods are certainly lonesome by yourself. I suppose you'll be willing to make an early start."

"The earlier the better. I've got a long way to go."

They made their plans, and soon they parted to complete preparations for the journey. The girl went into her house: Ben took the rifle, and followed by the wolf, struck down the main street of the village.

It can be said for Ben that he aroused no little conjecture and interest in the minds of the townspeople, striding through the street with the savage woods creature following abjectly at his heels. Evidently Ben's conquest was complete: the animal obeyed his every command as quickly as an intelligent dog. It was noticeable, however, that even the hardiest citizens kept an apprehensive eye on the wolf during the course of any conversation with Ben.

He bought supplies—flour and salt and a few other essentials—simple tools and utensils such as are carried by prospectors, blankets, shells for his rifle, and a few, simple, hard-wearing clothes. He went to bed dead tired, his funds materially reduced. But before dawn he was up, wholly refreshed; and after a hasty breakfast went to pack his horses for the trip.

Beatrice came stealing out of the shadows, more than ever suggestive of some timid creature of the forest, and the three of them saddled and packed the animals. As daylight broke they started out, down the shadowed street of the little town.

"The last we'll see of civilization for a long, long time," the girl reminded him.

The man thrilled deeply. "And I'm glad of it," he answered. "Nothing ahead but the long trail!"



It was a long trail, that which they followed along Poor Man's creek in the morning hours. The girl led, by right of having some previous acquaintance with the trail. The three pack horses walked in file between, heads low, tails whisking; and Ben, with Fenris at his horse's hoofs, brought up the rear. Almost at once the spruce forest dropped over them, the silence and the gloom that Ben had known of old.

This was not like gliding in a boat down-river. The narrow, winding trail offered a chance for the most intimate study of the wilderness. From the river the woodsfolk were but an occasional glimpse, the stir of a thicket on the bank: here they were living, breathing realities,—vivid pictures perfectly framed by the frosty green of the spruce.

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From the first mile these two riders were the best of companions. They talked gaily, their voices carrying to each other with entire ease through the still glades. He found her spirited, warm-hearted, responding with an eager gladness to every fresh manifestation of the wild; and in spite of his gay laughter she read something of the dark moodiness and intensity that were his dominant traits. But he was kind, too. His attitude toward the Little People met with on the trail—the little, scurrying folk—was particularly appealing: like that of a strong man toward children. She saw that he was sympathetic, instinctively chivalrous; and she got past his barrier of reserve as few living beings had ever done before.

She saw at once that he was an expert horseman. Riding a half-broken mustang over the winding, brush-grown moose trails of the North is not like cantering a thoroughbred along a park avenue, and a certain amount of difficulty is the rule rather than the exception; but he controlled his animal as no man of her acquaintance had ever done. He rode a bay mare that was not, by a long way, the most reliable piece of horseflesh McClurg owned, yet she gave him the best she had in her, scrambling with a burst of energy on the pitches, leaping the logs, battling the mires, and obeying his every wish. The joy of the Northern trails depends largely upon the service rendered by the horse between one's knees, and Ben knew it to the full.

Before the first two hours were past Beatrice found herself thrilling with admiration at Ben's woodcraft. Not only by experience but by instinct and character he was wholly fitted for life in the waste places. Just as some artists are born with the soul of music, he had come to the earth with the Red Gods at his beck and call; the spirit of the wild things seemed to move in his being. She didn't wholly understand. She only knew that this man, newly come from "The States," riding so straight and talking so gaily behind her, had qualities native to the forest that were lacking not only in her, but in such men as her father and Ray Brent. Seemingly he had inherited straight from the youngest days of the earth those traits by which aboriginal man conquered the wild.

The first real manifestation of this truth occurred soon after they reached the bank of Poor Man's creek. All at once he had shouted at her and told her to stop her horse. She drew up and turned in her saddle, questioning.

"There's something stirring in the thicket beside you. Don't you hear him?"

Beatrice had sharp ears, but she strained in vain for the sound that, forty feet farther distant, Ben heard easily. She shook her head, firmly believing his imagination had led him astray. But an instant later a coyote—one of those gray skulkers whose wailing cries at twilight every woodfarer knows—sprang out of his covert and darted away.

Beatrice was amazed. The significance of the incident went further than the fact of mere good hearing. The coyote, except when he chooses to wail out his wrongs at the fall of night, is one of the forest shadows for silence—yet Ben had heard him. It meant

nothing less than that strange quickening of the senses found in but few—master woodsmen—that is the especial trait and property of the beasts themselves.

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Now that they climbed toward Spruce Pass their talk died away, and more and more they yielded themselves to the hushed mood of the forest. Their trail was no longer clearly pronounced. It was a wilderness thoroughfare in the true sense,—a winding path made by the feet of the great moose journeying from valley to valley.

Wild life became ever more manifest. They saw the grouse, Franklin's fowl so well beloved by tenderfeet because of their propensity to sit still under fire and give an unsteady marksman a second shot. Fool hens, the woodsman called them, and the motley and mark of their weak mentality were a red badge near the eye. The fat birds perched on the tree limbs over the trail, relying on their mottled plumage, blending perfectly with the dull grays and browns of the foliage, to keep them out of sight. But such wiles did not deceive Ben. And once, in provision for their noon lunch, a fat cock tumbled through the branches at Beatrice's pistol shot.

The pine squirrels seemed to be having some sort of a competitive field meet, and the tricks they did in the trees above the trail filled the two riders with delight. They sped up and down the trunks; they sprang from limb to limb; they flicked their tails and turned their heads around backward and stood on their haunches, all the time chattering in the greatest excitement. Once a porcupine—stupid, inoffensive old Urson who carries his fort around on his back—rattled his quills in a near-by thicket; and once they caught a glimpse of a mule deer on the hillside. This was rather too cold and hard a country, however, to be beloved by deer. Mostly they dwelt farther upriver.

All manner of wild creatures, great and small, had left signs on the trails. There were tracks of otter and mink, those two river hunters whose skins, on ladies' shoulders, are better known than the animals themselves. They might be only patches of fur in cities, but they were living, breathing personages here. Particularly they were personages to the trout. Ben knew perfectly how the silver fish had learned to dart with such rapidity in the water. They learned it keeping out of the way of the otter and the mink.

They saw the tracks of marten—the mink that has gone into the tree tops to live; the doglike imprints of a coyote at which Fenris whimpered and scratched in excitement (doubtless wishing to run him down and bite him, as is the usual reception to the detested coyote by the more important woods creatures) and once the fresh mud showed that an old grizzly—the forest monarch, the ancient, savage despot of the woods of which all foresters, near and far, speak with deep respect—had passed that way but a few minutes before. Foresters both, the two riders had every reason to believe that the old gray tyrant was lurking somewhere in the thickets beside the trail, half in anger, half in curiosity watching them ride past. And of course the tracks of moose, and of their fellows of mighty antlers, the caribou, were in profusion.

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To all these things Beatrice responded with the joy of a true nature lover. Her heart thrilled and her eyes were bright; and every new track was a fresh surprise and delight. But Ben was affected more deeply still. The response he made had its origin and font in deeply hidden centers of his spirit; mysterious realms that no introspection could reveal or words lay bare.

He knew nothing of Beatrice's sense of constant surprise. In his own heart he had known that all these woodspeople would be waiting for him—just as they were—and he would have known far greater amazement to have found some of them gone. And instead of sprightly delight he knew only an all-pervading sense of comfort, as a man feels upon returning to his home country, among the people whom he knows and understands.

XII

At the very headquarters of Poor Man's Creek, where the stream had dwindled to a silver thread between mossy banks, Beatrice and Ben made their noon camp. They were full in the heart of the wild, by now, and had mounted to those high levels and park lands beloved by the caribou. They built a small fire beside the stream and drew water from the deep, clear pools that lay between cascade and cascade.

Ben Darby slowly became aware that this was one of the happiest hours of his life. He watched, with absorbed delight, the deft, sure motions of the girl as she fried the grouse and sliced bread, while Ben himself tended to the coffee. Already the two were on the friendliest terms, and since they were to be somewhere in the same region, the future offered the most pleasing vistas to both of them. When the horses were rested and Ben's pipe was out, they ventured on. Following a caribou trail, they ascended a majestic range of mountains—a trail too steep to ride and which the pack horses accomplished only with great difficulty—emerging onto a high plateau of open parks and small clumps of the darkest spruce. It was, of course, the most scenic part of the journey; and the inclination to talk died speedily from the lips.

They rode in silence, watching. Both of them were sure that words, no matter how beautiful and eloquent, could be only a sacrilege. The very tone of the high ranges is that of silence vast and eternal beyond scope of thought, and the only sounds that can fittingly shatter that mighty breathlessness are the great, calamitous phenomena of nature,—the thunder crashing in the sky and the avalanche on the slope. The forests they had just left were deeply silent, but the far hush had been alleviated by the soft noises of wild creatures stirring about their occupations; perhaps also by the feeling that the thickets were full of sound pitched just too high or just too low for human ears to hear; but even this relief was absent here. The high peaks stretched before them, one after another, until they faded into the horizon,—majestic, aloof, utterly and grandly silent.

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The snow still lay deep over the plateau, packed to the consistency of ice, and the marmots had not yet emerged to welcome the spring with their shrill, joyous whistling. From their high place they could see the hills spread out below them,—fold after fold as of a great cloak, deeply green, seemingly infinite in expanse, broken only by the blue glint of the Agnes lakes, like two great twin sapphires hidden in the forest. But they couldn't make out a single roof top of Snowy Gulch. The forest had already claimed it utterly.

This was the caribou range; wherever they looked they saw the tracks of the noble animals in the snow. Later they caught a glimpse of the creatures themselves, a small herd of perhaps half a dozen swinging along the snow in their indescribable pacing gait. They were in fitting surroundings, their color inexpressibly vivid against the snow, and Ben's heart warmed and thumped in his breast at the sight.

But the trail descended at last into the great valley of the Yuga. Mile after mile, it seemed to them, they went down, leaving the snow, leaving the open glades, into the dark, still glens of spruce. At last they paused on the river bank.

Ben was somewhat amazed at the size of the stream when it emerged below the rapids. It was, at its present high stage, fully one hundred and fifty yards across, such a stream as would bear the traffic of commerce in any inhabited region. They turned down the moose trail that followed its bank.

But it was not to be that this journey should hold only delight for Ben. A half-mile down the river he suddenly made a most momentous and disturbing discovery.

He had stopped his horse to reread the copy of Hiram Melville's letter, intending to verify his course. In the shadow of the tall, dark spruce—darkening ever as the light grew less—his eye sped swiftly over it. His gaze came to rest upon a familiar name.

"Look out for Jeff Neilson and his gang," the letter read. "They seen some of my dust."

Neilson—no wonder Ben had been perplexed when Beatrice had first spoken her name. No wonder it had sounded familiar. And the hot beads moistened his brow when he conceived of all the dreadful possibilities of that coincidence of names.

Yet because he was a woodsman of nature and instinct, blood and birth, he retained the most rigid self-control. He made no perceptible start. At first he did not glance at Beatrice. Slowly he folded the letter and put it back into his pocket.

"I'm going all right," he announced. He urged his horse forward. His perfect self-discipline had included his voice: it was deep, but wholly casual and unshaken. "And how about you, Miss Neilson?"

He pronounced her name distinctly, giving her every chance to correct him in case he had misunderstood her. But there was no hope here. "I'm going all right, I know."

"It seems to me we must be heading into about the same country," Ben went on. "You see, Miss Neilson, I'm going to make my first permanent camp somewhere along this still stretch; I've had inside dope that there's big gold possibilities around here."

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"It has never been a gold country except for pockets, some of them remarkably rich," she told him doubtfully, evidently trying not to discourage him. "But my father has come to the conclusion that it's really worth prospecting. He's in this same country now."

"I suppose I'll meet him—I'll likely meet him to-night when I take you to the cabin on the river. You said his name was—"

"Jeffery Neilson."

For all that he was prepared for it, the name was a straight-out body blow to Ben. He had still dared to hope that this girl was of no blood kin of the claim-jumper, Jeffery Neilson. The truth was now only too plain. By the girl's own word he was operating in Hiram Melville's district and unquestionably had already jumped the claim. His daughter was joining him now, probably to keep house for him; and for all that Ben knew, already possessing guilty knowledge of her father's crime.

It was hard to hold the head erect, after that. Already he had builded much on his friendship with this girl, only to find that she was allied with the enemy camp. He saw in a flash how unlikely it would be that Ezram and himself could drive the usurpers out: the claim-jumper is a difficult problem, even when the original discoverer is living and in possession, much more so when he is silent in his grave.

Ben had known the breed since boyhood, and he hated them as he hated coyotes and pack-rats. They lacked the manhood to brave the unknown in pursuit of the golden fleece; they waited until after years of grinding labor the strike was made and then pounced down upon the claim like vultures on the dead. Ben was glad he had not obeyed his impulse to tell the girl of his true reason for coming to the Yuga. He knew now, with many foes against him, he could best operate in the dark.

His thought flashed to Ezram. The recovery of the mine had been the old man's fondest dream, the last hope of his declining years, and this setback would go hard with him. The blow was ever so much more cruel on Ezram's account than his own. Ben could picture his downcast face, trying yet to smile; his sobered eyes that he would try to keep bright. But there would be certain planning, when they met again over their camp fire. And there were three of them allied now. Fenris the wolf had come into his service.

He glanced back at the gray-black creature that followed at the heels of his horse; and now, at twilight's graying, he saw that a significant and startling change had come over him. He no longer trotted easily behind them. He came stalking, almost as if in the hunt, his ears pointing, his neck hairs bristling, and there were the beginnings of curious, lurid lightnings in his eyes. There could be but one answer. He had been swept away in the current of madness that sweeps the forest at the fall of darkness: the age-old intoxication of the wilderness night. The hunting hours were at hand. The

creatures of claw and fang were coming into their own. Fenris was shivering all over with those dark wood's passions that not even the wisest naturalist can fully understand.

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The air was tingling and electric, just as Ben recalled it a thousand nights. Everywhere the hunters were leaving their lairs and starting forth; grasses moved and brush-clumps rustled; blood was hot and savage eyes were shot with fire. The mink, with unspeakable savagery, took the trail of a snow-shoe rabbit beside the river-bed; a lynx with pale, green, luminous eyes began his stalk of a tree squirrel, and various of Fenris' fellows—pack brothers except for his own relations with men—sang a song that was old when the mountains were new as they raced, black in silhouette against the paling sky, along a snowy ridge.

Ben felt a quickening of his own senses, not knowing why. *His* blood, too, spurted inordinately fast through his veins, and his flesh seemed to creep and tingle. There could be no surer proof of his legitimacy as a son of the wilderness. The passions that maddened the first men, near to the beasts they hunted in their ancient forests, returned in all their fullness. The dusk deepened. The trail dimmed so that the eye had to strain to follow it.

Complex and weird were the passions invoked to-night, but not even to the gray wolf that is, beyond all other creatures, the embodiment of the wilderness spirit, did there come such a madness, such a dark and terrible lust, as that which cursed a certain wayfarer beyond the next bend in the river. This was not one of the forest people, neither the lynx, nor the hunting otter, nor even the venerable grizzly with whom no one contests the trail. It was a human being,—a man of youthful body and strong, deeply lined, yet savage face.

A close observer would have noticed the faintest tremor and shiver throughout his body. His eyes were very bright, vivid even in the dying day. He was deeply lost in his own mood, seemingly oblivious to the whole world about him. He carried a rifle in his hands.

He was on his way to report to his chief; and just what would be forthcoming he did not know. But if too much objection were raised and affairs got to a crucial stage, he had nothing to fear. He had learned a certain lesson—an avenue to triumph. It was strange that he had never hit upon it before.

His blood was scalding hot, and he was swept by exultation. Not for an instant had he hesitated, nor would he ever hesitate again. There was no one in the North of greater might than he! No one could bend his will from now on. He had found the road to triumph.

Ray Brent had discovered a new power within himself. Perhaps even his chief, Jeffery Neilson, must yield before his new-found strength.

XIII

As twilight darkened to the full gloom of the forest night, Ben and Beatrice rode to a lonely cabin on the Yuga River,—one that had been built by Hiram Melville years past and was just at the mouth of the little creek on which, less than a half-mile distant, he had his claim. They had seen a lighted window from afar, marking the end of Beatrice's hard day's ride.

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"Of course you won't try to go on to-night?" she asked Ben. "You'll stay at the cabin?"

"There likely won't be room for three," he answered. "But it's a clear night. I can make a fire and sleep out."

It was true. The stars were emerging, faint points of light through the darkening canopy of the sky; and to the East a silver glint on the horizon forecast the rising moon.

They halted at last; and Beatrice saw her father's form, framed in the doorway. She hastened into his arms: waiting in the darkness Ben could not help but hear his welcome. Many things were doubtful; but there could be no doubt of the love that Neilson bore his daughter. The amused, half-teasing words with which he received her did not in the least disguise it. "The joy and the light of his life," Ben commented to himself. The gray old claim-jumper had this to redeem him, at least.

"But why so many horses, Beatrice?" he asked. "You—brought some one with you?"

Ben was not so far distant that he failed to discern the instant change in Neilson's tone. It had a strained, almost an apprehensive quality such as few men had ever heard in his voice before. Plainly all visitors in this end of the mountains were regarded with suspicion.

"He's a prospector—Mr. Darby," the girl replied. "Come here, Ben—and be introduced." She turned toward her new-found friend; and the latter walked near, into the light that streamed over him from the doorway. "This is my father, Mr. Darby—Mr. Neilson. Some one told him this was a good gold country."

Ben had already decided upon his course of action and had his answer ready. He knew perfectly that it would only put Neilson on his guard if he stated his true position; and besides, he wanted word of Ezram. "I may have a wrong steer, Mr. Neilson," he said, "but a man I met down on the river-trail, out of Snowy Gulch, advised me to come here. He said that he had some sort of a claim up here that his brother left him, and though it was a pocket country, he thought there'd soon be a great rush up this way."

"I hardly know who it could have been that you met," Neilson began doubtfully. "He didn't tell you his name—"

"Melville. I believe that was it. And if you'll tell me how to find him, I'll try to go on to-night. I brought him some of his belongings from Snowy Gulch—"

"Melville, eh? I guess I know who you mean now. But no—I don't know of any claim unless it's over east, beyond here. Maybe further down the river."

Ben made no reply at once; but his mind sped like lightning. Of course Neilson was lying about the claim: he knew perfectly that at that moment he was occupying one of

Hiram Melville's cabins. He was a first-class actor, too—his voice indicating scarcely no acquaintance with or interest in the name.

"He hasn't come up this way?" Ben asked casually.

"He hasn't come through here that I know of. Of course I'm working at my claim—with my partners—and he might have gone through without our seeing him. It seems rather unlikely."

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Ben was really puzzled now. If Ezram had already made his presence known and was camping somewhere in the hills about, there was no reason immediately evident why Neilson should deny his presence. Ben found himself wondering whether by any chance Ezram had been delayed along the trail, perhaps had even lost his way, and had not yet put in an appearance.

"He told me, in the few minutes that I talked to him, that his cabin was somewhere close to this one—I thought he said up this creek."

"There is a cabin up the creek a way," Neilson admitted, "but it isn't the one he meant. It's on my claim, and my two partners are living in it. But when he said near to this one, he might have meant ten miles. That's the way we Northern men speak of distance."

There was nothing more to say, nothing to do at present. He said his farewells to the girl, refused an invitation to pass the night in the cabin, and made his way to the green bank of the stream. Four hundred yards from the cabin, and perhaps a like number from the cabin of Ray and Charley—obscured from both by the thickets—he pitched his camp.

In the cabin he had left Jeffery Neilson catechized his daughter, trying to learn all he could concerning Ben. It was true that he carried the dead Hiram's rifle, and that the latter's pet wolf followed at his heels, but it was wholly probable that the old man, Hiram's brother, with whom he had conversed at the river, had designated him to get them. He had been courteous and respectful throughout the journey to the Yuga, Beatrice said, and he had also saved her from possible death in the fangs of the wolf the evening previous. Neilson decided that he would take no steps at present but merely wait and watch developments.

Meanwhile Ben had made his fire and unpacked his horses. He confined his riding horse with a picket rope; the others he turned loose. Then he cooked a simple meal for himself and the gaunt servant at his heels.

When the night had come down in full, and as he sat about the glowing coals of his supper fire, he had time to devote serious thought to the fate of Ezram. It occurred to him that perhaps the old man had discovered, at a distance, the presence of the claim-jumpers; and was merely waiting in the thickets for a chance to take action. If such were the case, sooner or later they could join their fortunes again. It was also easy to imagine that Ezram had lost his way on the journey out.

He stood at the edge of the firelight, gazing out into the darkened forest. The wolf crouched beside him: alert, watching his face for any command. It was wholly plain that the gaunt woods creature had accepted him at once as his master; and that the bond between them, because of some secret similarity of spirit, was already far closer than between most masters and their pets.

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Ben sensed another side of the forest to-night because of his inborn love of the waste places not often seen. The thickets were menacing, sinister to-night. The spruce crept up to the skyline with darkness and mystery: he realized the eternal malevolence that haunts their silent fastnesses. They would have tricks in plenty to play on such as would lose their way on their dusky trails! Oh, they would have no mercy or remorse for any one who was lost, *out there*, to-night! Ben felt a heavy burden of dread!

Even now, old Ezram might be wandering, vainly, through the gloomy, whispering woods, ever penetrating farther into their merciless solitudes. And no homes smoked in the clearings, no camps glowed in the immensity of the dark—out there. This was just the beginning of the forest; clear into the shadow of the Arctic Circle, where the woodlands gave way to the Weary wastes of barrens, there was no break, no tilled fields or fisher's villages, only an occasional Indian encampment which not even a wolf, running through the night, might find. His supply of food would quickly be exhausted, fatigue would break his valiant spirit. Ben planned an extensive search for his tracks as soon as the morning light permitted him to see.

He missed the old man's comradeship with a deep and fervid longing. They had come to count on each other, these past weeks. It wasn't alone infinite gratitude that he felt for him now. The thing went too deep to tell. Yet there was no use seeking for him to-night.

He turned to the wolf and dropped his hand upon the animal's shoulder. Fenris started, then quivered in ecstasy. "I wish I had your nose, to-night, old boy," Ben told him. "I'd find that old buddy of mine. I wish I had your eyes to see in the dark, and your legs to run. Fenris, do you know where he is?"

The wolf turned his wild eyes toward his master's face, as if he were trying to understand.

XIV

Impelled by an urge within himself Ben suddenly knelt beside his lupine friend. He could not understand the flood of emotion, the vague sense of impending and dramatic events that stirred him to the quick. He only knew, with a knowledge akin to inspiration, that in Fenris lay the answer to his problem.

The moment was misted over with a quality of unreality. In the east rose the moon, shining incredibly on the tree tops, showering down through the little rifts in the withholding branches, enchanting the place as by the weaving of a dream. The moon madness caught up Ben like a flame, enthralling him as never before. He knew that white sphere of old. And all at once he realized that here, at his knees, was one who knew it too,—with a knowledge as ancient and as infinite as his own. Not for nothing

had the wolf breed lived their lives beneath it through the long roll of the ages. Its rising and its setting had regulated the hunting hours of the pack

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time without end; its beams had lighted the game trails where the gray band had bayed after the deer; its light had beheld, since the world was young, the rapturous mating of the old pack leader and his female. Fenris too knew the moon-madness; but unlike Ben he had a means of expression of the wonder and mystery and vague longing that thrilled his wild heart. No man who has heard the pack song to the moon could doubt this fact. It is a long, melancholy wail, poignant with the pain of living, but it tells what man can not.

Ben knew, now, why he was a forester, a woodsman famed even among woodsmen. Most of his fellows had been tamed by civilization; they had lived beneath roofs instead of the canopy of heaven, and they had almost forgotten about the moon. Ben, on the other hand, was a recurrence of an earlier type, inheriting little from his immediate ancestors but reverting back a thousand centuries to the Cave and the Squatting Place. His nature was that of prehistoric man rather than that of the son of civilization; and in this lay the explanation for all that had set him apart from the great run of men and had made him the master woodsman that he was. And because his spirit was of the wildwood, because he also knew the magic of the moon, he was able to make this wildwood thing at his feet understand and obey his will.

The world of to-day seemed to fade out for him and left only the wolf, its fierce eyes on his own. Time swung back, and this might have been a scene of forgotten ages,—the wolf, the human hunter, the smoldering camp fire, the dark, jagged line of spruce against the sky. It was thus at the edge of the ice. Wolf and man—both children of the wild—had understood each other then; and they could understand each other now.

“Fenris, old boy,” the man whispered. “Can you find him for me, Fenris? He’s out there somewhere—” the man motioned toward the dark—“and I want him. Can you take me to him?”

The wolf trembled all over, struggling to get his meaning. This was no creature of subordinate intelligence: the great wolf of the North. He had, besides the cunning of the wild hunters, the intelligence that is the trait of the whole canine breed. Nor did he depend on his sense of hearing alone. He watched his master’s face, and more than that, he was tuned and keyed to those mysterious vibrations that carry a message from brain to brain no less clearly and swift than words themselves,—the secret wireless of the wild.

“He’s my buddy, old boy, and I want you to find him for me,” Ben went on, more patiently. He searched his pockets, drawing out at last the copy of the letter Ezram had given him that morning, and, because the old man had carried it for many days, it could still convey a message to the keen nose of the wolf. He put it to the animal’s nostrils, then pointed away into the darkness.

Fenris followed the motion with his eyes; and presently his long body stiffened. Ben watched him, fascinated. Then the wolf sniffed at the paper again and trotted away into the night.

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In one leap Ben was on his feet, following him. The wolf turned once, saw that his master was at his heels, and sped on. They turned up a slight draw, toward the hillside.

It became clear at once that Fenris was depending upon his marvelous sense of smell. His nose would lower to the ground, and sometimes he tacked back and forth, uncertainly. At such times Ben watched him with bated breath. But always he caught the scent again.

Once more he paused, sniffing eagerly; then turned, whining. Just as clearly as if they had possessed a mutual language Ben understood: the animal had caught the clear scent at last. The wolf loped off, and his fierce bay rang through the hushed forest.

It was a long-drawn, triumphant note; and the wild creatures paused in their mysterious, hushed occupations to listen. It was also significant that it made certain deadly inroads in the spirit of Ray Brent, sitting in his distant cabin. He marked the direction of the sound, and he cursed, half in awe, under his breath. He had always hated the gray rangers. They were the uncanny demons of the forest.

Ben followed the running wolf as fast as he could; and in his eagerness he had no opportunity for conjecture as to what he would find at the end of the pursuit. Yet he did not believe for an instant this was a false trail. The wolf's deep, full-ringing bays were ever more urgent and excited, filling the forest with their uproar. But quite suddenly the silence closed down again, seemingly more deep and mysterious than ever.

Ben's first sensation was one of icy terror that crept to the very marrow of his bones. He knew instantly that there was a meaning of dreadful portent in the abrupt cessation of the cries. He halted an instant, listening, but at first could hear no more than the throb of his heart in his breast and the whisper of his own troubled breathing. But presently, at a distance of one hundred yards, he distinguished the soft whining of the wolf.

Fenris was no longer running! He had halted at the edge of a distant thicket. The cold sweat sprang out on Ben's forehead, and he broke into a headlong run.

There was no later remembrance of traversing that last hundred yards. The hillside seemed to whip under his feet. He paused at last, just at the dark margin of an impenetrable thicket. The wolf whined disconsolately just beyond the range of his vision.

"Ezram!" he called, a curious throbbing quality in his voice. "Are you there, Ez? It's me—Ben."

But the thickets neither rustled nor spoke. The cracked old voice he had learned to love did not speak in relief, in that moment of unutterable suspense. Indeed, the silence

seemed to deepen about him. The spruce trees were hushed and impassive as ever; the moon shone and the wind breathed softly in his face. Fenris came whimpering toward him.

Together, the man and the wolf, they crept on into the thicket. They halted at last before a curious shadow in the silvered covert. Ben knew at once he had found his ancient comrade.

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He and Ezram had had their last laugh together. He lay very still, the moonlight ensilvering his droll, kindly face,—sleeping so deeply that no human voice could ever waken him. An ugly rifle wound yawned darkly at his temple.

XV

The first effect of a great shock is usually a semi-paralysis of the entire mental mechanism and is, as a rule, beneficent. The brain seems to be enclosed in a great preoccupation, like a wall, and the messages of pain and horror brought by the nerves batter against it in vain. The senses are dulled, the perceptions blunted, and full realization does not come.

For a long time, in which time itself stood still, Ben sat beside the dead body of his old counselor and friend as a child might sit among flowers. He half leaned forward, his arms limp, his hands resting in his lap, a deep wonder and bewilderment in his eyes. Dully he watched the moon lifting in the sky and felt the caress of the wind against his face, glancing only from time to time at the huddled body before him. The wolf whined softly, and sometimes Ben reached his hand to caress the furry shoulder.

But slowly his wandering faculties returned to him. He began to understand. Ezram was dead—that was it—gone from his life as smoke goes in the air. Never to hear him again, or see him, or make plans with him, or have high adventures beside him along the lonely trails. Fenris had found him in the darkness: here he lay—the old family friend, the man who had saved him, redeemed him and given him his chance, his old “buddy” who had brought him home. The thing was not credible at first: that here, dead as a stone, lay the shell of that life that had been his own salvation. He studied intently the gray face, missed its habitual smile and for really the first time his gaze rested upon the yawning wound in the temple.

He gazed at it in speechless, growing horror, and something like an incredible cold descended upon him. The entire hydraulic system of his blood seemed to be freezing. His hands were cold, his vitals icy and lifeless. There was, however, the beginning of heat somewhere back of his eyes. He could feel it but dimly, but it was increasing, slowly, like a smoldering coal that eats its way into wood and soon will burst into a flame. Slowly he began to grow rigid, his muscles flexing. His face underwent a tangible change. The lines deepened, the lips set in a hard line, the eyes were like those of a reptile,—cold, passionless, unutterably terrible. His face was pale like the paleness of death, but it appeared more like hard, white metal than flesh. His mind began to work clear again; he began to understand.

Ezram had been shot, murdered by the men who had jumped his claim. Beatrice’s father, who had talked to him, had probably committed the crime: if not he, one of his understrappers at his order. He found himself recalling what Jeffery Neilson had said.

Oh, the man had been sharp! Believing that in the depth of the forest the body would never be discovered, he had tried to send Ben farther into the interior in search of him.

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He arose, wholly self-mastered, and with hard, strong hands made a detailed examination of Ezram's wound. He had evidently been shot by a rifle of large caliber, probably at close range. Ezram's own gun lay at his feet, loaded but not cocked.

"They shot you down in cold blood, old boy, didn't they?" he found himself asking. "You didn't have a chance!"

But the gray lips were setting with death, and could not answer. Ben had forgotten for the instant; he must keep better hold of himself. The time was not ripe to turn himself loose. But he did wish for one more word with Ezram, just a few little minutes of planning. They could doubtless work out something good together. They could decide what to do.

From this point his mind naturally fell to Ezram's parting advice to him. "I've only got one decent place to keep things safe, and that ain't so all-fired decent," the old man had told him. "I always put 'em down my bootleg, between the sock and the leather. If I ever get shuffled off, all of a sudden, I want you to look there careful."

Still with the same deathly pallor he crept over the dead leaves to Ezram's feet. His hands were perfectly steady as he unlooped the laces, one after another, and quietly pulled off the right boot. In the boot leg, just as Ezram had promised, Ben found a scrap of white paper.

He spread it on his knee, and unfolded it with care. The moonlight was not sufficiently vivid, however, for him to read the penciled scrawl. He felt in his pocket for a match.

Because his mind was operating clear and sure, his thoughts flashed at once to his enemies in their cabins along the creek. He did not want them to know he had found the body. His first instinct was to work in the dark, to achieve his ends by stealth and cunning! It was strange what capacity for cunning had come upon him. Oh, he would be crafty—sharp—sure in every motion.

It was unlikely, however, that the faint glare of a match could carry so far. To make sure he walked behind the covert, then turned his back to the canyon through which the creek flowed. The match cracked, inordinately loud in the silence, and his eyes followed the script. Ezram had been faithful to the last:

To WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

In case of my death I leave all I die possessed of including my brother Hiram's claim near Yuga River to my pard and buddy, Ben Darby.

(Signed) EZRA MELVILLE.

The document was as formal as Ezram could make it, with a carefully drawn seal, and for all its quaint wording, it was a will to stand in any court. But Ezram had not been able to hold his dignity for long. He had added a postscript:

Son, old Hiram made a will, and I guess I can make one too. I just found out about them devils that jumped our claim. I left you back there at the river because I didn't want you taking any dam fool risks till I found out how things lay.

I just got one thing to ask. If them devils get me—get them. My life ain't worth much but I want you to make them pay for the little it is worth. Never stop till you've done it.

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Ben lighted match after match until he had absorbed every word. Then he folded the paper and placed it in his pocket; but the action did not in the least take his eyes from the words. He could still see them, written in fire. They were branded on his spirit.

He stood wholly motionless for a space of almost a minute, as if listening. The heat back of his eyes was more intense now. The red coals were about to burst into flame. All the blood of his huge body seemed to be collecting there, searing his brain.

The moon was no longer white in the sky. It had turned a fiery red. The stars were red too,—all of them more red than the Star of War. “I want you to make them pay,” a voice said clearly in his ears. “Never stop till you’ve done it.”

And now Ben was no longer pale. His face was no longer hard and set. Rather it was dark—dark as dark earth. His eyes glowed like coals beneath his black brows. He was not standing still and lifeless now. He was shivering all over with the blackest hate, the most deadly fury.

“Make them pay,” he said aloud again, “and never stop till you’ve done it.”

A sudden snarl from the lips of the wolf drew his eyes downward. Heaven help him; for the moment he had forgotten Fenris! But he must not forget him again. They had work to do, the two of them.

Fenris was no longer whining disconsolately. His master’s fury had passed to him, and Ben looked and saw before him not the docile pet, but the savage beast of the wild. The hair was erect on his shoulders, his lips were drawn, too; he was crouched as if for battle. The eyes, sunken in their sockets, were red and terrible to see. Yet he was still Ben’s servant. That quality could never pass from him. The eyes of two met,—the wolf and the man.

At that instant the little tongue of flame that had been mounting in Ben’s brain burst into a dreadful conflagration. It was the explosion at last, no less terrible because of its silence—because the sound of the least, little wind was still discernible in the distant thickets. He dropped to his knees before the wolf, seizing its head in a terrific grasp. He half jerked it off its feet, till he held it so that its eyes burned straight into his.

“Fenris, Fenris!” he breathed. “We’ve got to make them pay. And we must not stop till we’re done.”

It was more than a command. It had the quality of a vow. And now, as they knelt, eyes looking into eyes, it was like a pagan rite in the ancient world.

Their separate identities were no longer greatly pronounced. They were not man and beast, they were simply the wolves of the forest. The old qualities most often associated with manhood—gentleness, forbearance, mercy—seemed to pass away

from Ben as a light passes into darkness. Only the Wolf was left, the dominant Beast—that darker, hidden side of himself from which no man can wholly escape and which civilization has only smothered, as fresh fuel smothers a flame. Not for nothing had his fellows known him as “Wolf” Darby; and now the name was true.

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The Beast that dwells under every man's skin, in a greater or less degree, was in the full ascendancy at last. The unnamable ferocity that marks the death-leap of the wild hunters was in his face. In his eyes was cunning,—such craft as marks the pack in its hunting. All over him was written that unearthly rage that is alone the property and trait of the woods creatures: the fury with which a she-wolf fights for her cubs or a rattlesnake avenges the death of its mate. Mercy, remorse, compassion there was none.

And the demon gods of the wilderness rejoiced. For uncounted thousands of years the tide of battle had flowed against them; and it was long and long since they had won such a victory as this. Mostly their men children had forsaken their leafy bowers to live in houses. They tilled the ground rather than hunt in the forest. The cattle that had once run wild in the marshes now fed dully in enclosed pastures; the horses—that mighty breed that once mated and fought and died in freedom on the high lands—pulled lowly burdens in the cultivated fields. Even some of the canine people too—first cousins to the wolves themselves—had sold themselves into slavery for a gnawed bone and a chimney corner. But to-night the wild had claimed its own again.

Here was one, at least, who had come back into his own. The forest seemed to whisper and thrill with rapture.

PART TWO

THE WOLF-MAN

XVI

As a wolf might plan a hunt in the forest, Ben planned his war against Neilson and his subordinates. He knew perfectly that he must not attempt open warfare. The way of the wolf is the way of cunning and stealth: the stalk through the thicket and the ferocious attack upon the unsuspecting; and such example must guide Ben in his operations. He could not be too careful, too furtive.

His foes were three against one, and they were on their own ground. They knew the trails and the lay of the country; and as always, in the science of warfare, this was an advantage hardly to be overcome. Ben knew that his only hope lay in the finest strategy. First he must make a surprise attack, and second, he must utilize all natural advantages.

He was well aware that he could lie in ambush, close to the mine, and probably send one man to a speedy death with a rifle bullet. But he did not have one enemy; he had three. The survivors of the first shot would immediately seek shelter—probably

returning shot for shot—and that would insert an element of uncertainty into the venture. At the distance he would be obliged to shoot, he would possibly only succeed in wounding one of his enemies, and he might miss him altogether. Such a plan as this was wholly too uncertain for adoption.

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There must be no sporting chances in his strategy. The way of the wolf is to cover every opening, to prepare for every contingency that his brute mind can foresee. He would give and receive no quarter, and the ancient fairness and honor must be likewise forgotten. He must take no risk with his own life until the last of the three was down. What happened thereafter did not greatly concern him. The world could shatter to atoms after that for all he would care. He was a son of forest solitude; and he had but one dream left in life.

It was not his aim to give his foes the least chance to fight back, the slightest hope of battle. He would use any advantage, descend to any wile. This was not to be a sportsmen's war, but a grim battle to the death, inexorable and merciless.

These things were all fully known to him before ever he left the hillside, and like a man asleep, walked down to his camp. The fire had burned down to coals—sullen and angry—but he heaped on fuel, and they broke into a blaze. Then, Fenris at his side, he squatted on the ground beside the dancing flame.

He watched it, fascinated; mostly silent but sometimes muttering and whispering half-enunciated words. His red eyes and the black hair, matted about his lips and shadowing the backs of his hands, gave him a wild, fierce look; and it was as if the primal blood-lust and hatred that seared him had literally swept him back into the forgotten centuries,—the first, savage human hunter at the edge of the retreating glaciers. The scene had not changed: dark spruce and the red glow of fire; and there was atavism in his very posture. The first men had squatted beside their camp fires this same way, their wolfine pets beside them, as they made their battle plans.

The eager flames held Ben's fascinated gaze as a crystal ball might hold the eyes of a seer. They seemed to have a message for him if he could just grasp it, a course whereby he might achieve success. Oh, they could be cruel, relentless—mercilessly eating their way into sensitive flesh. They were no respecters of persons, these creeping, leaping tongues. Nor must *he* have any scruples or qualms as to how he gained his ends. He too must be merciless, and if necessary, strike down the innocent in order to reach the guilty.

As he watched certain knowledge reached him of life and death. The conclusion slowly came to him that just blind killing was not enough. For all he knew death might bring instant forgetfulness—and thus not constitute in itself a satisfactory measure of vengeance. The *fear* of death was a reality and a torment: for all he knew, the thing itself might be a change for the better. It might be that, suddenly hurled out of this world of three dimensions, his enemies would have no knowledge nor carry no memories of the hand that struck them down. There could be no satisfaction in this. To murder from ambush might be a measure of expedience, but never one of self-gratification. When Ben struck he wanted them to know who was their enemy, and for what crime they were laid low.

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The best way of all, of course, was to strike indirectly at them, perhaps through some one they loved. Soon, perhaps, he would see the way.

He went to his blankets, but sleep did not come to him. The wolf stood on guard. Beatrice Neilson had fallen into happy dreams long since, but there was further wakefulness in Hiram Melville's newer cabin, farther up-creek. Ray Brent and Chan Heminway still sat over their cups, the fiery liquid running riot in their veins, but slumber did not come easily to-night. And when Beatrice was asleep, Neilson stole down the moonlit moose trail and joined his men.

"I've brought news," he began, when the door had closed out the stars and the breath of the night. Chan, his small eyes glazed from strong drink, staggered to his feet to offer his chair to his chief. Brent, however, was in no mood for servility to-night. He had done man's work in the early evening; and his triumph and his new-found sense of power had not yet died in his body. Perhaps he had learned the way to all success. There was a curious sullen defiance in the blearing gaze over his glass.

"What's your news?" Ray's voice harshened, possessing a certain quality of grim levity. "I guess old Hiram's brother hasn't come to life again, has he?"

It was a significant thing that both Chan and Neilson looked oppressed and uneasy at the words. Like all men of low moral status they were secretly superstitious, and these boasting words crept unpleasantly under their skins. It is never a good thing to taunt the dead! Ray had spoken sheerly to frighten and shock them, thus revealing his own fearlessness and strength; yet his voice rang louder than he had meant. He had no desire for it to carry into the silver mystery of the night.

"The less you say about Hiram's brother the better," Neilson answered sternly. "We've thrashed it out once to-night." He straightened as he read the insolence, the gathering insubordination in the other's contemptuous glance; and his voice lacked its old ring of power when he spoke again. "Jumpin' claims is one thing and murder is another."

Ray, spurred on by the false strength of wickedness, drunk with his new sense of power, was already feeling the first surge of deadly anger in his veins. "I suppose if you had been doin' it, you'd let that old whelp take back this claim, worth a quarter million if it's worth a cent. Not if I know it. It was the only way—and the safe way too."

"Safe! What if by a thousandth chance some one would blunder on to that body you left in the brush? What if some sergeant of mounted police would say to his man, 'Go get Ray Brent!' Where would you be then? You've always been a murderer at heart, Brent—but some time you'll slip up—"

"Only a fool slips up. Don't think I didn't figure on everything. As you say, there's not one chance in a thousand any one will ever find him. If they do, there wouldn't be any

kind of a case. Likely the old man hasn't got a friend or relation on earth. I've searched his pockets—there's nothing to tell who he is. We'll have our claim recorded soon, and it would be easy to make him out the claim-jumper rather than us—”

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"Wait just a minute before you say he ain't got any friends, or at least acquaintances. That's what I came to see you about to-night." Neilson paused, for the sake of suspense. "Beatrice came up to-night, as agreed, and she had a prospector with her—and he knew old Hiram's brother."

A short, tense silence followed his words, and Ray stared into his cup. It might be that just for an instant the reckless light went out of his eyes and left them startled and glazing. Then he got to his feet. "Then God Almighty!" he cried. "What you waiting for? Why don't you croak him off before this night's over?"

"Wait, you fool, till you've heard everything," Neilson replied. "There's no hurry about killing. As I told you, the less work of that kind we do, the more chance we've got of dying in our beds. It may be reasonable for one prospector to disappear, but some one's going to be suspicious if two of 'em do. I think I've already handled the matter."

"I'd handle it, and quick too," Ray protested.

"You'd handle yourself up a gallows, too. He doesn't seem to be a close friend of this old man; he just seems to have met up with him at the river, and the old man steered him up here. He asked me where the old man's claim was, and said he wanted to go over and see him. He was taking Hiram's wolf and his gun up to him. I told him I hadn't heard of the claim, that it must be farther inside, and I think I put it over. He ain't got the least suspicion. What he'll do is hang around here a while, I suppose, prospecting—and likely enough soon forget all about the old devil. I just came down here to tell you he was here and to watch your step."

"Then the first thing up," Chan Heminway suggested, "is to bury the stiff."

"Spoke up like a fool!" Ray answered. "Not till this man is dead or out of the country. It's well hidden, and don't go prowling anywheres near it. If he's the least bit suspicious, or even if he's on the lookout for gold, he'd likely enough follow you. But there's one thing we can do—and that quick."

"And what's that?"

"Start Chan off to-morrow to the office in Bradleyburg and record this claim in our names. We've waited too long already."

"Ray, you're talking like a man now," Neilson agreed. "You and I stay here and work away, innocent as can be, on the claim. Chan, put that bottle away and get to bed. Take the trail down first thing to-morrow. Then we can laugh at all the prospectors that want to come."

XVII

Soon after the break of dawn Ben put his pick and shovel on his shoulder, and leisurely walked up the creek past Ray's cabin. Since Chan Heminway had already departed down the long trail to Bradleyburg—a town situated nearly forty miles from Snowy Gulch—Ray alone saw him pass; and he eyed him with some apprehension. Daylight had brought a more vivid consciousness of his last night's crime; and a little of his bravado had departed from him. He moved closer to his rifle.

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Yet in a moment his suspicions were allayed. Ben was evidently a prospector, just as he claimed to be, and was venturing forth to get his first “lay of the land.” The latter continued up the draw, crossed a ridge, halted now and then in the manner of the wild creatures to see if he were being followed, and finally by a roundabout route returned to the lifeless form of his only friend. The wolf still trotted in silence behind him.

The vivid morning light only revealed the crime in more dreadful detail. The withered form lay huddled in the stained leaves; and Ben stood a long time beside it, in deep and wondering silence, even now scarcely able to believe the truth. How strange it was that this old comrade could not waken and go on with him again! But in a moment he remembered his work.

Slowly, laboriously, with little outward sign of the emotion that rent his heart, he dug a shallow grave. He knew perfectly that this was a serious risk to his cause. Should the murderer return for any purpose, to his dead, the grave would of course show that the body had been discovered and would put him on his guard against Ben. Nevertheless, the latter could not leave these early remains to the doubtful mercy of the wilderness: the agents of air and sun, and the wild beasts.

He threw the last clod and stood looking down at the upturned earth. “Sleep good, old Ez,” he murmured in simple mass for the dead. “I’ll do what you said.”

Then, at the head of the grave, he thrust the barrel of Ezram’s rifle into the ground, a monument grim as his own thoughts. The last rite was completed; he was free to work now. From now on he could devote every thought to the work in hand,—the payment of his debts.

By the same roundabout route he circled back to his camp, cooked his meager lunch, and in the afternoon ventured forth again. But he was prospecting in earnest this time, though the prospects that he sought were those of victory to his cause, rather than of gold. He was seeking simply a good, general idea of the nature and geography of the country so that he might know better how to plan his attack.

His excursion took him at last to the wooded bank of the river. He stood a long time, quite motionless, listening to the water voices that only the wise can understand. This was really a noble stream. It flowed with such grandeur in its silence and solitude; old and gray and austere, it was a mighty expression of wilderness power,—resistless, immortal, eternally secretive. The waters flowed darkly, icy cold from the melting snow; but like a sleeping giant they would be quick to seize upon and destroy such as would try to brave their currents, likely never to yield them up again. Flowing forever through the uninhabited forest no man would ever know the fate of those the river claimed.

He was above the camp when he descended to its banks, but he worked his way down through the thickets toward Jeffery Neilson’s cabin. The river flowed quietly here, a

long, still stretch that afforded safe boating. Yet the smooth waters did not in the least alleviate Ben's haunting sense of their sinister power and peril. The old gray she-wolf is not to be trusted in her peaceful moments. His keen ears could distinctly hear the roar and rumble of wild waters, just below.

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The river was of great depth as well as breadth,—one of the king rivers of the land. Ben found himself staring into its depths with a quickening pulse. He had a momentary impression that this great stream was his ally, a mighty agent that he could bend to his will.

He approached the long, sloping bank on which stood Neilson's cabin; and he suddenly drew up short at the sight of a light, staunch canoe on the open water. It was a curious fact that he noticed the craft itself before ever he glanced at its occupant. A thrill of excitement passed over him. He realized that this boat simplified to some degree his own problem, in that it afforded him means of traversing this great water-body, certainly to be a factor in the forthcoming conflict. The boat had evidently been the property of Hiram Melville.

Then he noticed, with a strange, inexplicable leap of his heart, that its lone occupant was Beatrice Neilson. His eye kindled at the recognition, and the beginnings of a smile flashed to his lips. But at once remembrance came to him, crushing his joy as the heel crushes a tender flower. The girl was of the enemy camp, the daughter of the leader of the triumvirate of murderers. While she herself could have had no part in the crime, perhaps she already had guilty knowledge of it, and at least she was of her father's hated blood.

He had builded much on his friendship with this girl; but he felt it withering, turning black—like buds under frost—in his cold breast. There could be no friendly words, except in guile; no easy comradeship between them now. They were on opposite sides, hated foes to the last. Perhaps she would be one of the innocents that must suffer with the guilty; but he felt no remorse. Not even this lovely, tender wood child must stand in his way.

Nevertheless, he must not put her on guard. He must simulate friendship. He lifted his hat in answer to her gay signal.

She wore a white middy blouse, and her brown, bare forearms flashed pleasantly in the spring sun. Her brown hair was disarranged by the wind that found a passway down the river, and her eyes shone with the sheer, unadorned love of living. Evidently she had just enjoyed a brisk paddle through the still stretches of the river. With sure, steady strokes she pushed the craft close to the little, board landing where Ben stood. She reached up to him, and in an instant was laughing—at nothing in particular but the fun of life—at his side.

The man glanced once at Fenris, spoke in command, then turned to the girl. "All rested from the ride, I see," he began easily.

Her instincts keyed to the highest pitch, for an instant she thought she discerned an unfamiliar tone, hard and hateful, in his voice. But his eyes and his lips were smiling;

and evidently she was mistaken. “I never get tired,” she responded. She glanced at the tools in his arms. “I suppose you’ve found a dozen rich lodes already this morning.”

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"Only one." He smiled, significantly, into her eyes. Because she was a forest girl, unused to flattery, the warm color grew in her brown cheeks. "And how was paddling? The water looks still enough from here."

"It's not as still as it looks, but it is easy going for a half-mile each way. If you aren't an expert boatman, however—I hardly think—I'd try it."

"Why not? I'm fair enough with a canoe, of course—but it looks safe as a lake."

"But it isn't." She paused. "Listen with those keen ears of yours, Mr. Darby. Don't you hear anything?"

Ben did not need particularly keen ears to hear: the far-off sound of surging waters reached him with entire clearness. He nodded.

"That's the reason," the girl went on. "If something should happen—and you'd get carried around the bend—a little farther than you meant to go—you'd understand. And we wouldn't see any more of Mr. Darby around these parts."

Her dark eyes, brimming with light and laughter, were on his face, but she failed to see him slowly stiffen to hide the sudden, wild leaping of his heart. Could it be that he saw the far-off vision of his triumph?

His eyes glowed, and he fought off with difficulty a great preoccupation that seemed to be settling over him.

"Tell me about it," he said at last, casually. "I was thinking of making a boat and going down on a prospecting trip."

"I'll tell you about it, and then I think you'll change your mind. The first cataract is the one just above where we first saw the river—coming in; then there's this mile of quiet water. From that point on the Yuga flows into a gorge—or rather one gorge after another; and sometime they'll likely be almost as famous as some of the great gorges of your country. The walls are just about straight up on each side, and of course are absolutely impassable. I don't know how many miles the first gorge is—but for nearly two hundred miles the river is considered impassable for boats. Two hundred and fifty miles or so below there is an Indian village—but they never try to go down the river from here. A few white men, however, have tried to go down with canoe-loads of fur."

"And all drowned?" Ben asked.

"All except one party. Once two men went down when the river was high—just as it is now. They were good canoeists, and they made it through. No one ever expected they would come out again."

“And after you’ve once got into the rapids, there’s no getting out—or landing?”

“Of course not. I suppose there are places where you might get on the bank, but the gorge above is impassable.”

“You couldn’t follow the river down—with horses?”

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"Yes, in time. Of course it would be slow going, as there are no trails, the brush is heavy, and the country is absolutely unexplored. You see it has never been considered a gold country—and of course the Indians won't go except where they can go in canoes. Some of the hills must be impassable, too. I've heard my father speak about it—how that if any criminal—or any one like that—could take down this river in a canoe in high water—and get through into that great, virgin, trackless country a hundred miles below, it would be almost impossible to get him out. Unless the officers could chase him down the same way he went—by canoe—it would take literally weeks and months for them to get in, and by that time he could be hidden and located and his tracks covered up."

"And with good ambushes, able to hold off and kill a dozen of them, eh?" Ben's hands shook, and he locked them behind him. "They call that country—what?"

"'Back There.' That's all I've ever heard it called—'Back There.'"

"It's as good a name as any. Of course, the reason they were able to make it through in high water was due to the fact that most of the rocks and ledges were submerged, and they could slide right over them."

"Of course. Many of our rivers are safer in high water. But you seriously don't intend to take such a trip—"

He looked up to find her eyes wide and full upon his. Yet her concern for him touched him not at all. She was his enemy: that fact could never be forgotten or forgiven.

"I want to hear about it, anyway. I heard in town the river is higher than it's been for years—due to the Chinook—"

"It *is* higher than I've ever seen it. But it's reached its peak and has started to fall, and it won't come up again, at least, till fall. When the Yuga rises it comes up in a flood, and it falls the same way. It's gone down quite a little since this morning; by the day after tomorrow no one could hope to get through Devil's Gate—the first cataract in the gorge."

"Not even with a canoe? Of course a raft would be broken to pieces."

"Not a canoe, either, in two or three days, if the river falls like it usually does. But tell me—you aren't serious—"

"I suppose not. But it gets my imagination—just the same. I suppose a man would average better than twenty miles an hour down through that gorge, and would come out at *Back There*."

Their talk moved easily to other subjects; yet it seemed to Ben that some secondary consciousness held up his end of the conversation. His own deeper self was lost in



curious and dark conjectures. Her description of the river lingered in his thoughts, and he seemed to be groping for a great inspiration that was hovering just beyond his reach—as plants grope for light in far-off leafy jungles. He felt that it would come to him in a moment: he would know the dark relation that these facts about the river bore to his war with Neilson. It was as if an inner mind, much more subtle and discerning than his normal consciousness, had seen great possibilities in them, but as yet had not divulged their significance.

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"I must be going now," the girl was saying. "Father pretty near goes crazy when I stay away too long. You can't imagine how he loves me and worries about me—and how fearful he is of me—"

His mind seemed to leap and gather her words. It was true: she was the joy and the pride and the hope of the old man's life. All his work, his dreams were for her. And now he remembered a fact that she had told him on the outward journey: that Ray Brent, the stronger of Neilson's two subordinates, loved her too.

"To strike at them indirectly—through some one they love—" such had been his greatest wish. To put them at a disadvantage and overcome his own—to lead them into his own ambushes. And was it for the Wolf to care what guiltless creatures fell before his fangs in the gaining of his dreadful ends? Was the gratification of his hate to be turned aside through pity for an innocent girl? Mercy and remorse were two things that he had put from him. It was the way of the Wolf to pay no attention to methods, only to achieve his own fierce desires. He stood lost in dark and savage reverie.

"Good-by," the girl was saying. "I'll see you soon—"

He turned toward her, a smile at his lips. His voice held steady when he spoke.

"It'll have to be soon, if at all," he replied. "I've got to really get to work in a few days. How about a little picnic to-morrow—a grouse hunt, say—on the other side of the river? It's going to be a beautiful day—"

The girl's eyes shone, and the color rose again in her tanned cheeks. "I'd think that would be very nice," she told him.

"Then I'll meet you here—at eight."

XVIII

Alone by the fire Ben had opportunity to balance one thing with another and think out the full consequences of his plan. As far as he could discern, it stood every test. It meant not only direct and indirect vengeance upon Neilson and his followers; but it would also, past all doubt, deliver them into his hands. That much was sure. When finally they came to grips—if indeed they did not go down to a terrible death before ever that time came—he would be prepared for them, with every advantage of ground and fortress, able to combat them one by one and shatter them from ambush. Best of all, they would know at whose hands, and for what crime, they received their retribution.

One by one he checked the chances against him. First of all, he had to face the great chance of failure and the consequent loss of his own life. But there was even

recompense in this. He would not die unavenged. The blow that he would thereby deal to his enemies would be terrible beyond any reckoning, but he would have no regrets.

There were two outstanding points in his favor, one of them being that the river was rapidly falling. By the time a canoe could be built the river would be wholly unnavigable. There were no canoes procurable in Snowy Gulch, if indeed a lightning trip could be made there and back to secure one, before the river fell. The conversation with the frontiersman at the river bank brought out this fact. Lastly, a raft could not live a moment in the rapids.

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Very methodically he began to make his preparations. He untied his horse, leaving it free to descend to Snowy Gulch. Then he packed a few of his most essential supplies, his gun and shells, such necessary camp equipment as robes, matches, soap and towels, cooking and table ware, an axe and similar necessities. In the way of food he laid out flour, rice, salt, and sugar, plus a few pounds of tea—nothing else. The entire outfit weighed less than two hundred pounds, easily carried in three loads upon the back.

In the still hour of midnight, when the forest world was swept in mystery, he carried the equipment down to the canoe that Beatrice had left the evening before. He loaded the craft with the greatest care, balancing it now and then with his hands at the sides, and covering up the food supplies with robes and blankets. Then he drew from his pocket a sheet of paper—evidently a paper sack that had once held provisions, cut open and spread—and wrote carefully, a long time, with a pencil.

He had no envelope to enclose it, no wax to seal it. He did, however, carry a stub of a candle—a requisite to most northern men who are obliged to build supper fires in wet forest. Folding his letter carefully, he sealed it with tallow. Then wrapping one of his blankets about him, he prepared to wait for the dawn. Fenris growled and murmured in his sleep.

Ben himself had not slept the night before; and moved and stirred by his plan of the morrow, slumber did not come easily to him now. He too murmured in his sleep and had weird, tragic dreams between sleep and wakefulness. But the shadows paled at last. A ribbon of light spread along the eastern horizon; the more familiar landmarks emerged—ghosts at first, then in vivid outline, the wooded sky line strengthened; the nebulous magic of the moon died in the forest. Birds wakened and sang; the hunting creatures crept to their lairs; sleeping flowers opened. Morning broke on a clear, warm day.

Ben devoured a heavy breakfast—all that he could force himself to swallow—then prepared to wait for Beatrice. He knew perfectly that explanations would be difficult if Neilson or one of his followers found him with the loaded boat. It was not likely, however, that any of his enemies—except, of course, Beatrice herself—would venture down that way.

Just before eight he saw her come,—first the glint of her white blouse in the green of the forest, and then the flash of her brown arms. Her voice rang clear and sweet through the hushed depths as she called a greeting. A moment later she was beside him.

“Go back and get your heavy coat,” he commanded. “I’ve already been out on the water, and it’ll freeze you stiff.”

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He was not overly pleased with himself for speaking thus. He had resolved to put mercy from him; and he was taking a serious risk to his own cause by the delay of sending her back for her warmer garments. She smiled into his eyes, but she came of a breed of women that had learned obedience to men, and she immediately turned. But Ben had builded better than he thought. His eyes were no longer on her radiant face. They had dropped to the pistol, in its holster, that she carried in her hands, preparatory to strapping it about her waist. It was disconcerting that he had forgotten about her pistol. It was one of those insignificant trifles that before now have disrupted the mightiest plans of nations and of men. His mind sped like lightning, and he thanked his stars that he had seen it in time. This pistol and a small package, the contents of which he did not know, were the only equipment she had.

"It's going to be a bright day," the girl said hesitatingly. "I don't think I'll need the fur coat —"

"Get it, anyway," Ben advised. "The wind's keen on the river. Leave your pistol and your package here—and go up and back at top speed. I'll be arranging the canoe—"

She laid down the things, and in a moment the thickets had hidden her. Swiftly Ben reached for the gun, and for a few speeding seconds his fingers worked at its mechanism. He was busy about the canoe when the girl returned.

Evidently Beatrice was in wonderful spirits. The air itself was sparkling, the sun—beloved with an ardor too deep for words by all northern peoples—was warm and genial in the sky; the spruce forest was lush with dew, fragrant with hidden blossoms. It was a Spring Day—nothing less. Both of them knew perfectly that miracle was abroad in the forest,—flowers opening, buds breaking into blossoms, little grass blades stealing, shy as fairies, up through the dead leaves; birds fluttering and gossiping and carrying all manner of building materials for their nests.

Spring is not just a time of year to the forest folk, and particularly to those creatures whose homes are the far spruce forests of the North. It is a magic and a mystery, a recreation and a renewed lease on life itself. It is hope come again, the joy of living undreamed of except by such highly strung, nerve-tingling, wild-blooded creatures as these; and in some measure at least it is the escape from Fear. For there is no other name than Fear for the great, white, merciless winter that had just departed.

High and low, every woods creature knows this dread, this age-old apprehension of the deepening snow. Perhaps it had its birth in eons past, when the great glaciers brought their curse of gold into the temperate regions, locking land and sea under tons of ice. Never the frost comes, and the snow deepens on the land, and the rivers and lakes are struck silent as if by a cruel magician's magic, but that this old fear returns, creeping like poison into the nerves,

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bowing down the heart and chilling the warm wheel of the blood. For the rodents and the digging people—even for the mighty grizzly himself—the season means nothing but the cold and the darkness of their underground lairs. For those that try to brave the winter, the portion is famine and cold; the vast, far-spreading silence broken only by the sobbing song of the wolf pack, starving and afraid on the distant ridges. Man is the conqueror, the Mighty One who can strike the fire, but yet he too knows the creepy, haunting dread and deep-lying fear of the northern winter. But that dread season was gone now, yielding for a few happy months to a gay invader from the South; and the whole forest world rejoiced.

Both Beatrice and Ben could sense the new wakening and revival in the still depths about them. The forest was hushed, tremulous, yet vibrant and ecstatic with renewed life. The old grizzly bear had left his winter lair; and good feeding was putting the fat again on his bones; the old cow moose had stolen away into the farther marshes for some mystery and miracle of her own. Everywhere young calves of caribou were breathing the air for the first time, trying to stand on wobbly legs and pushing with greedy noses into overflowing udders. The rich new grass yielded milk in plenty for all these wilderness nurslings. Even the she-wolf forgot her wicked savagery to nurse and fondle her whelps in the lair; even the she-lynx, hunting with renewed fervor through the branches, knew of a marvelous secret in a hollow log that she would be torn to scraps of fur rather than reveal.

The she-ermine, her white hair falling out, was brooding a litter of cutthroats and murderers in a nest of grass and twigs, and each one of them was a source of pride and joy to her mother heart. Even the wolverine had some wicked-eyed little cubs that, to her, were precious beyond rubies; but which would ultimately receive all the oaths in the language for stealing bait on the trap lines out from the settlements.

Beatrice, a woods creature herself, knew the stir and thrill of spring; but there were also more personal, more deeply hidden reasons why she was happy to-day. She was certainly a very girlish-girl in most ways, with even more than the usual allowance of romance and sentiment, and the idea of an all-day picnic with this stalwart forester went straight home to her imagination. She had been tremendously impressed with him from the first, and the day's ride out from Snowy Gulch had brought him very close to her indeed. And what might not the day bring forth! What mystery and wonder might come to pass!

Her dark eyes were lustrous, and the haunting sadness they often held was quite gone. Her face was faintly flushed, her red lips wistful, every motion eager and happy as a child's. But Ben looked at her unmoved.



Coldly his eye leaped over her supple, slender form. He saw with relief that she was stoutly clad in middie and skirt of wool, wool stockings, and solid little boots. The heavy coat she had brought was not particularly noteworthy in these woods, but it would have drawn instant admiration from knowing people of a great city. It was not cut with particular style, neither was it beautifully lined, but the fabric itself was plucked otter,—the dark, well-wearing fur of many lights and of matchless luster and beauty.

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"For goodness sake, Mr. Darby," the girl cried. "What have you got in this boat? Surely that isn't just the lunch—" She pointed to the pile of supplies, covered by the blankets, in the center of the craft.

"It looks like we had enough to stay a month, doesn't it?" he laughed. "There's blankets there, of course—for table cloths and to make us comfortable—and the lunch, and a pillow or two—and some little surprises. The rest is just some stores that I'm going to take this opportunity to put across the river—to my next camp. Now, Miss Neilson—if you'll take the seat in the bow. Fenris is going to ride in the middle—"

The girl's eyes fell with some apprehension on the shaggy wolf. "I haven't established very friendly relations with Fenris—"

"I'd leave him at home, but he won't stand for it. Besides I'd like to teach him how to retrieve grouse. Lie down, old boy." Ben motioned, and Fenris sprawled at his feet. "Now come here and pet him, Miss Neilson. His fur, at this season, is wonderful—"

Reluctant to show her fear before Ben, the girl drew near. The wolf shivered as the soft hand touched his side and moved slowly to his fierce head; but he gave no further sign of enmity.

"He understands," Ben explained. "He realizes that I've accepted you, and you're all right. Until he's given orders otherwise, he'll treat you with the greatest respect."

She was deeply and sincerely pleased. It did not occur to her, in the least, little degree, that occasion could possibly arise whereby contradictory orders would be given. Ben started to help her into the boat.

"You've not forgotten anything?" he asked casually.

"Nothing I can think of."

"Got plenty of extra shells?"

"Part of a box. It's a small caliber automatic, you see, and a box holds fifty."

"It is, eh?" Ben's tone indicated deep interest. "May I see 'em a minute? I think I had a gun like it once. Not the gun—just the box of shells."

She had strapped the weapon around her waist, by now, so she didn't attempt to put it in his hands. From her pocket she procured a small box of shells, and these she passed to him. He examined them with a great show of interest, balancing their weight in the palm of his hand; then he carelessly threw the box down among the duffle in front of the stern seat. Presently he started to push off.

“You’re not taking the other paddle?” the girl asked curiously.

“No. I don’t believe in letting young ladies work when I take ’em on an outing. You are just to sit in the bow and enjoy yourself. Fenris, sit still and don’t rock the boat!”

Just one moment more he hesitated. From his pocket he drew a piece of paper, carefully folded and sealed with tallow. This he inserted into a little crack in the blade of the second paddle—the one that was to be left at the landing.

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"Just a little note for your father," he explained, "to tell him where we are, in case he worries about you."

"That's very considerate of you," the girl answered in a thoughtful voice.

She wondered at the curious glowings, lurid as red coals, that came and went in his eyes.

XIX

After the manner of backwoods fathers Jeffery Neilson had offered no objections to his daughter's all-day excursion with Ben. The ways of the frontier are informal; and besides, he had every confidence in her ability to take care of herself. The only unfortunate phase of the affair concerned Ray. The latter would look with no favor upon the venture; and in all probability a disagreeable half-hour would ensue with him if he found it out.

The control of Ray Brent had been an increasingly difficult problem. Always sullen and envious, once or twice he had not been far from open rebellion. There is a certain dread malady that comes to men at the sight of naked gold, and Ray's degenerate type was particularly subject to it. Every day the mine had shown itself increasingly rich, and Ray's ambition had given way to greed, and his greed to avarice of the most dangerous sort. For instance, he had a disquieting way of gathering the nuggets into his hands, fondling them with an unholy love. Neilson realized perfectly, now, that the younger man would not be content with a fourth share or less; and on the other hand he resolutely refused to yield any of his own, larger share. Sometime the issue would bring them to grips. Ray's dreadful crime of a few days past had given him an added insolence and self-assurance that complicated the problem still further. The leopard that has once tasted human flesh is not to be trusted again. Finally, there remained this matter of Beatrice.

Neilson's love for his daughter forbade that he should force her to receive unwelcome attentions. Ray, on the other hand, had always insisted that his chief allow him a clear field. He would be infuriated when he heard of the trip she was taking with Ben to-day. Neilson straightened, resolving to meet the issue with old-time firmness.

When he heard his daughter's voice on the canoe landing, one hundred yards below, he was inordinately startled. She had not told him that their picnic would take them on to the water. The reason had been, of course, that Beatrice knew her father's distrust of the treacherous stream and either feared his refusal to her plan or wished to save him worry. Even now they were starting. He could hear the first stroke of the paddle through the hushed woods.

He turned toward the door, instinctively alarmed; then hesitated. After all, he could not tell her to come back. Beatrice would be mortified; and besides, there was nothing definite to fear. The river was almost as still as a lake for a long stretch immediately in front of the landing; even a poor canoeist could cross with ease. It was true that rapids, mile after mile of them past counting, lay just below, but surely the canoeists would stay at a safe distance above them. And if by any chance this young prospector had no skill with a canoe, Beatrice herself was an expert.

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Yet what, in reality, did he know of Ben Darby? He had liked the man's face: whence he came and what was his real business on the Yuga he had not the least idea. All at once a baffling apprehension crept like a chill through his frame.

He could not laugh it away. It laid hold of him, refusing to be dispelled. It was as if an inner voice was warning him, telling him to rush down to the river bank and check that canoe ride at all costs. It occurred to him, for the moment, that this might be premonition of a disastrous accident, yet vaguely he sensed a plot, an obscure design that filled him with ghastly terror. Once more the man started for the door.

Unaware of his ground, he did not hurry at first. He hardly knew what to say, by what excuse he could call Beatrice back to the landing. His heart was racing incomprehensibly in his breast, and all at once he started to run.

At the first step he fell sprawling, and stark panic was upon him when he got to his feet again. And when he reached the landing the canoe was already near the opposite shore, heading swiftly downstream.

He saw in one glance that the craft was rather heavily laden, Fenris atop the pile of duffle, and that Ben was paddling with a remarkably fast, easy stroke. "Come back, Beatrice," he shouted. "You've forgotten something."

The girl turned, waving, but Ben's voice drowned out hers. "We'll see you later," he called in a gay voice. "We can't come back now."

"Come back!" Neilson called again. "I order you—"

He stared intently, hoping that the man would turn. Already they were practically out of hearing; and not even Beatrice was dipping her paddle in obedience to his command. Looking more closely, he saw that the man only was paddling.

Then his eye fell to the landing on which he stood, instinctively trying to locate the second paddle. It lay at his feet. A foolhardy thing to do, he thought, a broken paddle, out there above the rapids, would mean death and no other thing. Helpless in the current, the canoe could not be guided through those fearful gates of peril below. If by a thousandth chance it escaped the rocks, it would be carried for unnumbered miles into a land unknown, a territory that could be entered only by the greatest difficulty—packing day after day over range and through thicket with a great train of pack horses—and from which the egress, except by the same perilous water route, would be almost impossible. But the thought passed as he discerned the white paper that had been fastened in the paddle blade.

He bent for it with eager hand. He knew instinctively that it contained an all-important and sinister message for him. His eyes leaped over the bold writing on the exterior.

“To Ezra Melville’s murderers,” Ben had written. And with that reading Jeffery Neilson knew a terror beyond any experienced in the darkest nightmare of his iniquitous life.

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It did not occur to him to bring the note, unopened, to Ray Brent. As yet he did not fully understand; yet he knew that the issue was one of seconds. *Seconds* must decide everything; his whole world hung in the balance. His hand ripped apart the sealed fold, and he held the sheet before his eyes.

Possessing only an elementary education Jeffery Neilson was not, ordinarily, a fast reader. Usually he sounded out his words only with the greatest difficulty. But to-day, one glance at the page conveyed to him the truth: from half a dozen words he got a general idea of the letter's full, dread meaning. Ben had written:

TO NEILSON AND HIS GANG:—

When you get this, Beatrice will be on her way to Back There—either there or on her way to hell.

Ezra Melville was my pard. A letter leaving his claim to me is in my pocket, and I alone know where Hiram's will is, leaving it to Ezram. Your title will never stand as long as those papers aren't destroyed. If you don't care enough about saving your daughter from me, at least you'll want those letters. Come and get them. I'll be waiting for you.

BEN DARBY.

As the truth flashed home, Neilson's first thought was of his rifle. He was a wilderness man, trained to put his trust in the weapon of steel; and if it were only in his hands, there might yet be time to prevent the abduction. One well-aimed bullet over the water, shooting with all his old-time skill, might yet hurl the avenger to his death in the moment of his triumph. Just one keen, long gaze over the sights,—heaven or earth could not yield him a vision half so glorious as this! For all his terror he knew that he could shoot as he had never shot before, true as a light-ray. His remorseless eyes for once could see clear and sure. One shot—and then Beatrice could seize the paddle and save herself. And he cursed himself, more bitterly than he had ever cursed an enemy, when his empty hands showed him that he had left his rifle in his cabin.

His pistol, however, was at his belt, and his hand reached for it. But the range was already too far for any hope of accurate pistol fire. His hard eyes gazed along the short, black barrel. His steady finger pressed back against the trigger.

The first shot fell far short. The pistol was of large caliber but small velocity; and a hundred yards was its absolute limit of point-blank range. He lifted the gun higher and shot again. Again he shot low. But the third bullet fell just a few feet on the near side of the canoe.

He had the range now, and he shot again. It was like a dream, outside his consciousness, that Beatrice was screaming with fear and amazement. She was

already too far to give or receive a message: all hope lay in the pistol alone. The fifth shot splashed water beyond the craft.

Once more he fired, but the boat was farther distant now, and the bullet went wild. The pistol was empty. Like a moose leaping through a marsh he turned back to his cabin for his rifle.

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But already he knew that he was lost. Before ever he could climb up the hundred yards to the cabin, and back again, the craft would be around the bend in the river. Heavy brush would hide it from then on. He hastened frantically up the narrow, winding trail.

XX

Ben was fully aware, as he pushed the canoe from landing, that the success of his scheme was not yet guaranteed. Long ago, in the hard school of the woods, he had found out life; and one of the things he had learned was that nothing on earth is infallible and no man's plans are sure. There are always coincidents of which the scheming brain has not conceived: the sudden interjection of unexpected circumstances. The unforeseen appearance of Beatrice's father on the landing had been a case in point.

Most of all he had been afraid that Beatrice herself would leap from the canoe and attempt to swim to safety. He had learned in his past conversations with her that she had at least an elementary knowledge of swimming. Had she not confessed at the same time fear of the water, his plan could have never been adopted. The northern girls have few opportunities to obtain real proficiency in swimming. Their rivers are icy cold, their villages do not afford heated natatoriums. Yet he realized that he must quiet her suspicions as long as possible.

"I've got the landing picked out," he told her as they started off. "I've been all over the river this morning. It is quite a way down—around the bend—but it's perfectly safe. So don't be afraid."

"I'm not afraid—with you. And how fast you paddle!"

It was true: in all her days by rivers she had never seen such perfect control of a canoe. He paddled as if without effort, but the streaming shore line showed that the boat moved at an astonishing rate. He was a master canoeist, and whatever fears she might have had vanished at once.

She talked gayly to him, scarcely aware that they were heading across and down the stream.

When her father had appeared on the bank, calling, she had not been in the least alarmed. Ben's gay shouts kept her from understanding exactly what he was saying. And when the old man had drawn his pistol and fired, and the bullet had splashed in the water some twenty yards toward shore, her mind had refused to accept the evidence of her senses.

The second shot followed the first, and the third the second, resulting in, for her part, only the impotence of bewilderment. Her first thought was that her father's fierce

temper, long known to her, had engulfed him in murderous rage. Trusting Ben wholly, the real truth did not occur to her.

She screamed shrilly at the fourth shot; and Ben looked up to find her pale as the foam from his flashing paddle. "Turn around and go back," she cried to Ben. "He'll kill you if you don't! Oh, please—turn around—"

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"And get in range of him so he *can* kill me?" Ben replied savagely. "Can't you see he's shooting at me?"

"Then throw up your hands—it's all some dreadful mistake. Can't you hear me—turn and go back."

The fifth and sixth shots were fired by now; and Neilson had gone to his cabin for his rifle. Ben smiled grimly into her white face.

"We'd better keep on going to our landing place," he advised. "There's no place to land above it—I went all over the shore this morning. That will give him time to cool down. I only want to get around this curve before he comes with his rifle."

She stared at him aghast, too confused and terrified to make rational answer. He was pale, too; but she had a swift feeling that the cold, rugged face was in some way exultant, too. The first chill of fear of him brushed her like a cold wind.

But they were around the bend by now, and Ben's breath caught as if in a triumphant gasp. Already all opportunity for the girl to swim to shore was irremediably past. While he could still control the canoe with comparative ease, the river was a swift-moving sheet of water that would carry any one but the strongest swimmer remorselessly into the rapids below. Ben smiled, like a man who has come into a great happiness, and rested on his paddle.

"Push into shore," the girl urged. "The home shore—if you can. Then I'll go and find him and try to quiet him. He'll kill you if you don't."

A short pause followed the girl's words. The man smiled coldly into her eyes.

"He'll kill me, will he?" he repeated.

The response to the simple question was simply unmitigated terror, swift and deadly, surging through the girl's frame. It caught and twisted her throat muscles like a cruel hand; and her childish eyes widened and darkened under his contemptuous gaze.

"What do you mean?" she asked breathlessly. "What—are you going to do?"

"He won't kill me," Ben went on. "I may kill him—and I will if I can—but he won't kill me. See—we're going faster all the time."

It was true. Strokes of the paddle were no longer necessary to propel the craft at the breakneck pace. It sped like an arrow—straight toward the perilous cataracts below.

The girl watched him with transcending horror, and slowly the truth went home. The supplies in the boat, her father's desperate attempt to rescue her, even at the risk of her

own life and the cost of Ben's, this white, exultant face before her, more terrible than that of the wolf between, the cold reptile eyes so full of some unhallowed emotion,—at last she saw their meaning and relation. Was it *death*—was *that* what this mad man in the stern had for her? She remembered what she had told him the day before, her description of the cataracts that lay below. She struggled to shake off the trance that her terror had cast about her.

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"Turn into the shore," she told him, half-whispering. There was no pleading in her tone: the hard eyes before her told her only too plainly how futile her pleas would be. "You still have time to steer into shore. I'll jump overboard if you don't."

He shook his head. "Don't jump overboard, Beatrice," he answered, some of the harshness gone from his tones. "It isn't my purpose to kill you—and to jump over into this stream only means to die—for any one except the most powerful swimmer. You'd be carried down in an instant."

The girl knew he spoke the truth. Only death dwelt in those cold and rushing waters. "What do you mean to do?" she asked.

Her tone was more quiet now, and he waited an instant before he answered. The canoe glided faster—ever faster down the stream. Somewhat afraid, but still trusting in the imperial mind of his master, the wolf raised his head to watch the racing shore line.

"It's just a little debt I owe your father—and his gang," Ben explained. "I'll tell you some time, in the days to come. It was a debt of blood—"

The girl's dark eyes charged with red fire. "And you, a coward, take your payment on a woman. Turn the canoe into the bank."

"The payment won't be taken from you," he explained soberly. "You'll be safe enough—even the fate that Neilson fears for you won't happen. I hate him too much to take *that* payment from you. I'd die before I'd touch the flesh of his flesh to mine! Do you understand that?"

His fury had blazed up, for the instant, and she saw the deadly zeal of a fanatic in his gray eyes. A hatred beyond all naming, a bitterness and a rage such as she had never dreamed could blast a human heart was written in his brown, rugged face. Her woman's intuition gave her added vision, and she glimpsed something of the fire that smoldered and seared behind his eyes. They were of one blood, this man in the stern and the wolf on the duffle.

"Then why—"

"You're safe with me—the daughter of Jeff Neilson can't ever be anything but safe with me—as far as the thing you fear is concerned. Don't be afraid for that. I'm simply paying an honest debt, and you're the unfortunate agent. Don't you know the things he's fearing now are more torment to him than anything I could do to his flesh? If we should be killed in these rapids that are coming, it will be fair enough too; he'll know what it is to lose the dearest thing on earth he has. For you and me it will only be a minute that won't greatly matter. For him it will be weeks—months! But that's only a part of it. I hope to bring you through. The main thing is—that sooner or later they'll

come for you—into a country where I'll have every advantage. Where there won't be any escape or chance for them. Where I can watch the trails, and shatter them—every one—as slow or as fast as I like. Where they'll have to hunt for me, week on week and month on month, their fears eating into them. That's my game, Beatrice. There will be discomfort for you—and some danger—but I'll make it as light as I can. And in another moment—”

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"You've still got time to turn back," the girl answered him, seemingly without feeling. "Glide into shore, and we'll try to catch an overhanging limb. It's my last warning."

It was true that a few seconds remained in which they might, with heroic effort, save themselves. But these were passing: already they could see the gleaming whitecaps of the cataract below.

The roar of the wild waters was in their ears. Ahead they could see great rocks, emerging like fangs above the water, sharp-edged and wet with spray. The boat was shuddering; the water seemed to covet them, and a great force, like the hand of a river god, reached at them from beneath as if to crush them in a merciless grasp. A hundred yards farther the smooth, swift water fell into a seething, roaring cataract—such a manifestation of the mighty powers of nature as checks the breath and awes the heart—a death stream in which seemingly the canoe would be shattered to pieces in an instant.

Ben shook his head. The girl's white hand flashed to her side, then rose sure and steady, holding her pistol. "Turn quick, or I'll fire," she said.

He felt that, if such action were in her power, she told the truth. No mercy dwelt in her clear gaze. His eye fell to the box of cartridges, now fallen safely among the duffle. Presently he smiled into her eyes.

"Your gun is empty, Beatrice," he told her quietly. He heard her sob, and he smiled a little, reassuringly. "Never mind—and pray for a good voyage," he advised. "We're going through."

XXI

The craft and its occupants were out of sight by the time Jeffery Neilson reached the river bank with his rifle. The flush had swept from his bronze skin, leaving it a ghastly yellow, and for once in his life no oaths came to his lips. He could only mutter, strangely, from a convulsed throat.

Like an insane man he hastened down the river bank, fighting his way through the brush. The thickets were dense, ordinarily impenetrable to any mortal strength except to that mighty, incalculable power of the moose and grizzly; yet they could not restrain him now. The tough clothes he wore were nearly torn from his body; his face and hands were scratched as if by the claws of a lynx; but he did not pause till he reached the bank of the gray river.

Only one more glimpse of the canoe was vouchsafed him, and that glimpse came too late. He saw the light barge just as it hovered at the crest of the rapids. Even if he could have shot straight at so great a range and had killed the man in the stern, no

miracle could have saved his daughter. She would have been instantly swept to her death against the crags.

Some measure of self-control returned to him then, and he made his way fast as he could toward the claim. Sensing the older man's distress, Ray straightened from his work at the sight of him.

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The face before him was drawn and white; but there was no time for questions. Hard hands seized his arm.

“Ray, do you know of a canoe anywhere—up or down this river?”

“There’s one at the landing. None other I know of.”

“Think, man! You don’t know where we can get one?”

“No. Old Hiram’s canoe was the only one. What’s the matter?”

“Do you think there’s one chance in a million of getting down through those rapids on a raft?”

Ray’s eyes opened wide. “A raft!” he echoed. “Man, are you crazy? Even at this high water a canoe wouldn’t have a chance in ten of making it. The river’s falling every hour —”

“I know it. Do you suppose there’s a canoe in town?”

“No! Of course there isn’t—one that you could even dream about shooting those rapids in. Besides, by the time we got there and packed it up—it would take two days to pack it the best we could do—the river would be too far down to tackle the trip at all. And it won’t come up again till fall—you know that. Tell me what’s the matter. Has Beatrice—”

“Beatrice has gone down, that’s all.”

“Then she’s dead—no hope of anything else. Only an expert could hope to take her through, and there’s nothing to live on Back There. What’s the use of trying to follow —?”

Neilson straightened, his eyes searching Ray’s. “She’s got food, I suppose. And she’s got an expert paddler to take her there.”

Ray’s face seemed to darken before his eyes. His hands half closed, shook in his face, then caught at Neilson’s shoulders. “You don’t mean—she’s run away?”

“Don’t be a fool. Not run away—abducted. The prospector I told you about—Darby—was the old man’s partner. He’s paying us back. Heaven only knows what the girl’s fate will be—I don’t dare to think of it. Ray, I wish to God I had died before I ever saw this day!”

Ray stared blankly. “Then he found out—about the murder?” he gasped.

“Yes. Here’s his letter. Take time—and read it. There’s no use to try to act before we think—how to act. If I could only see a way—”

Ray read the letter carefully, crumpling it at last in savage wrath. “It’s your fault!” he cried. “Why didn’t you save her for me as I’ve always asked you to do; why did you let her go out with him at all? I’ll bet she wanted to go—”

“I’d rather she had, instead of being taken by force!” The older man—aged incredibly in a few little minutes—slowly straightened. “But don’t storm at me, Ray!” he warned, carefully and quietly. “I’ve stood a lot from you, but to-day I’d kill you for one word!”

They faced each other in black disdain, but Ray knew he spoke the truth. There was no toying with this man’s wrath to-day.

“And if you’d let me croak this devil like I wanted to, it wouldn’t have happened either. But there’s no use crying about either one. The girl’s a goner, sure; she’s deep in the rapids by now.”

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"Yes, and it's part of this man's hellish plan to take her clear through to Back There. You see, he dares us to come for her—and he'll be waiting and ready for us, mark my words. My God, she's probably dead—smashed to pieces—already!"

"He says he's got the old man's letter, leaving the claim to him. That messes up things even worse."

"I wish I'd never heard of the claim. There's only one thing to do, and that's to rush into Snowy Gulch and get a big outfit—all the horses and supplies we can find—and go after her by land."

"Yes, and walk right into his trap. Think again, Neilson. It would take weeks and months to get in that way. Besides, what would happen to the claim while we're gone?"

"You needn't fear for the claim! Of course, I'd expect you to think of that first—you who loved Beatrice so dearly!" Neilson's face was white with disdain. "It'll be recorded in our names, by then—likely Chan is already in Bradleyburg—and Darby himself is the only man on earth we have to fear." He paused, putting his faith in desperate craft. "If you want to cinch the claim, the first thing to do is go and stamp the life out of Darby; otherwise he'll turn up and make us trouble, just as he says."

"He can't do much if the claim's recorded in our names!"

"He can make us plenty of trouble. If you want the girl, Ray—don't lose a minute. Put your things together as fast as you can. We'll try to get some men in Snowy Gulch to come with us—to join in the hunt—and we'll hire every pack horse in the country. Get busy, and get busy quick."

Reluctant to leave his gold, yet seeing the truth in Neilson's words, Ray hastened to his cabin to get such few supplies as would be needed for the day's march into Snowy Gulch. In less than five minutes they were on their way—tramping in file down the narrow moose trail.

They crossed the divide, thus reaching the headwaters of Poor Man's Creek; then took the trail down toward the settlements. But the two claim-jumpers had not yet learned all the day's ill news. Half-way to the mouth of the stream they met Chan Heminway on his way back to the claim.

At the first sight of him, riding in the rear of a long train of laden pack horses, they could hardly believe their eyes. It was not to be credited that he had made the trip to Bradleyburg and back in the few days he had been absent. Only an aeroplane could have made so fast a trip. Could it be that in spite of his definite orders he was returning with the duty of recording the claim still unperformed? To Neilson, however, the sight of the long pack train brought some measure of satisfaction. Here were horses laden with

the summer supplies that Chan had been told to procure, and they could be utilized in the pursuit of Beatrice. Two days at least could be saved.

“What in the devil you coming back for?” Ray shouted, when Chan’s identity became certain.

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Chan rode nearer as if he had not heard. He checked his horse deliberately, undoubtedly inwardly excited by the news he had to tell and perhaps somewhat triumphant because he was its bearer. "I'm coming back because there ain't no use in staying at Snowy Gulch any longer," he answered at last. "I've got the supplies, and I'm packin' up to the claim, just as I was told."

"But why didn't you go to Bradleyburg and record the claim?" Ray stormed. "Don't you know until that's done we're likely to be chased off any minute?"

Chan looked into his partner's angry eyes, and his own lips drew in a scowl. "Because there wasn't any use in goin' to Bradleyburg."

Ray was stricken with terror, and his words faltered. "You mean you could tend to it in Snowy Gulch—"

"I don't mean nothing of the kind. Shut up a minute, and I'll tell you about it. A few days ago Steve Morris got a letter addressed to old Hiram Melville—in care of Steve. He opened it and read it, and I heard about it soon as I got into town. There ain't no use of our trying to record that claim."

"For God's sake, why?"

"Because it's already recorded, that's why. We all felt so sure, and we wasn't sure at all. Before old Hiram died he wrote a letter—one of them two letters you heard about, Neilson—and which you wished you'd got hold of. Who that letter was to was an official in Bradleyburg—an old friend of Hiram's—and in it was a description of the claim. This letter Morris got was a notice that his claim was all properly filed in his—Hiram's—name. Whatever formalities was necessary was cut out because the old man had been too sick to make the trip—the recorder got special permission from Victoria. To be plain, I didn't file the claim because it's already filed, and I didn't want to show myself up as a claim-jumper quite as bad as that."

"It's all over town—about the claim?"

"Sure, but there won't be a rush. There's quite a movement over Bradleyburg way for one thing; for another, this is a pocket country, once and for always."

For some seconds thereafter his partners could make no intelligent response. This bitter blow had been anticipated by neither. But Ray was a strong man, and his self-control quickly returned to him.

"You see what that means, don't you?" he asked Neilson.

"It means we've lost!"



The eyes before him narrowed and gleamed. “So that's what it means to you! Well, I don't look at it just that way. It means to me that we've got to take these supplies and these pack horses and start out and find Ben Darby—and never stop hunting till we've found him.”

“Of course we've got to rescue Beatrice—”

“Rescuing Beatrice isn't all of it now, by a long shot. For the Lord's sake, Neilson—use your head a minute. Didn't old Hiram leave a will, giving this claim to his brother Ezra? If the claim wasn't recorded that will wouldn't mean much—but it is. And hasn't this Ben got a letter from Ezra leaving the claim to him? Now do you want to know who owns that claim? Ben Darby owns it, and as long as he can kick, that quarter of a million in gold can never be ours.”

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"You mean we've got to find him—and destroy that letter—"

"We've got to; that's all. He wrote us he had it, just to taunt us, and we've got to burn that up whether we find the girl or not. But that ain't all we've got to destroy—that piece of paper. You see that, don't you?"

Neilson breathed heavily. "It's all plain enough."

"I want it to be plain, so next time I want to let daylight through a man you won't stand in the way. It ain't just enough to burn up that letter. We've got to get the man who owns it, too. If we don't he'd still have a good enough case against us—with a good lawyer. Likely enough lots of people knew of their partnership, maybe have seen the letter—and they'd all be good witnesses in a suit. Our reputation ain't so good, after that Jenkins deal, that we'd shine very bright in a suit. Even if he couldn't prove his own claim, he could lug out the will old Hiram left—he alone knows where it's hid—and then his next nearest relatives would come in and get the claim. On the other hand, if we smash him, the thing will all quiet down; there'll be no claimants to work the mine; and after a few months we can step in and put up our own notices. But we've got to do that first—smash him wide-open as soon as we can catch up with him. He'll be way out in Back There, and no man would ever know what became of him, and there'd be nobody left to oppose us any more. But we can't be safe any other way."

Neilson nodded slowly. His subordinate had put the matter clearly; and there was truth in his words. In Ben's murder alone lay their safety.

He had always been adverse to bloodshed; but further reluctance meant ruin. Ben was one whom he could strike down without mercy or regret. And the blow would not be for expediency alone. There would be a personal debt to pay after the long months of searching. He could not forget that Beatrice was helpless in his hands.

"The thing to do is to turn back with Chan, at once," he said.

"Of course," Ray agreed. "That plan of yours to get help in chasing 'em down don't go any more. We don't want any spectators for what's ahead of us. Here's grub and horses a-plenty, and we needn't lose any time."

So they turned back toward the Yuga, on their quest of hate.

XXII

Beatrice Neilson was a mountain girl, with the strong thews of Jael, yet she hid her face as the canoe shot into the crest of the rapids. It seemed incredible to her that the light craft should buffet that wild cataract and yet live. She was young and she loved life; and death seemed very near.

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The scene that her eyes beheld in that last little instant in which the boat seemed to hang, shuddering, at the crest of the descent was branded indelibly on her memory. She saw Ben's face, set like iron, the muscles bunching beneath his flannel sleeves as he set his paddle. He was leaning forward, aware of nothing in the world but the forthcoming crisis. And in that swift flash of vision she saw not only the steel determination and the brutal savagery of the avenger. A little glimpse of the truth went home to her, and she beheld something of the misdirected idealism of the man, the intensity and steadfastness that were the dominant traits of his nature. She could not doubt his belief in the reality of his cause. Whether fancied or real the injury, deep wells of emotion in his heart had broken their seals and flowed forth.

The wolf crouched on the heap of supplies, fearful to the depths of his wild heart of this mighty stream, yet still putting his faith in his master in the stern. Beatrice saw his wild, frightened eyes as he gazed down into the frightful whirlpools. The banks seemed to whip past.

Then the rushing waters caught the craft and seemed to fling it into the air. There was the swift sense of lightning and incredible movement, of such incalculable speed as that with which a meteor blazes through the sky, and then a mighty surging, struggle; an interminable instant of ineffable and stupendous conflict. The bow dipped, split the foam; then the raging waters seized the craft again, and with one great impulse hurled it through the clouds of spray, down between the narrow portals of rocks.

Beatrice came to herself with the realization that she had uttered a shrill cry. Part of the impulse behind it was simply terror; but it was also the expression of an intensity of sensation never before experienced. She could have understood, now, the lure of the rapids to experienced canoeists. She forced herself to look into the wild cataract.

The boat sped at an unbelievable pace. Ben held his paddle like iron, yet with a touch as delicate as that of a great musician upon piano keys, and he steered his craft to the last inch. His face was still like metal, but the eyes, steely, vivid, and magnetic, had a look of triumph. The first of the great tests had been passed.

Sudden confidence in Ben's ability to guide her through to safety began to warm the girl's frozen heart. There were no places more dangerous than that just past; and he had handled his craft like a master. He was a voyageur: as long as his iron control was sustained, as long as his nerve was strong and his eye true she had every chance of coming out alive. But they had irremediably cast their fortunes upon the river, now. They could not turn back. She was in his whole charge, an agent of vengeance against her own father and his confederates.

Hot, blinding tears suddenly filled her eyes. Her frantic fear of the river had held them back for a time; but they flowed freely enough now the first crisis was past. In utter

misery and despair her head bowed in her hands; and her brown hair, disheveled, dropped down.

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Ben gazed at her with a curious mingling of emotions. It had not been part of his plan to bring sorrow to this girl. After all, she was not in the least responsible for her father's crimes. He had sworn to have no regrets, no matter what innocent flesh was despoiled in order that he might strike the guilty; yet the sight of that bowed, lovely head went home to him very deeply indeed. She was the instrument of his vengeance, necessary to his cause, but there was nothing to be gained by afflicting her needlessly. At least, he could give her his pity. It would not weaken him, dampen his fiery resolution, to give her that.

As he guided his craft he felt growing compassion for her; yet it was a personal pity only and brought no regrets that he had acted as he did.

"I wish you wouldn't cry," he said, rather quietly.

Amazed beyond expression at the words, Beatrice looked up. For the instant her woe was forgotten in the astounding fact that she had won compassion from this cast-iron man in the stern.

"I'll try not to," she told him, her dark eyes ineffably beautiful with their luster of tears. "I don't see why I should try—why I should try to do anything you ask me to—but yet I will —"

Further words came to him, and he could not restrain them. "You're sort of—the goat, Beatrice," he told her soberly. "It was said, long ago, that the sins of the father must be visited upon the children; and maybe that's the way it is with you. I can't help but feel sorry—that you had to undergo this—so that I could reach your father and his men. If you had seen old Ezram lying there—the life gone from, his kind, gray old face—the man who brought me home and gave me my one chance—maybe you'd understand."

They were speechless a long time, Beatrice watching the swift leap of the shore line, Ben guiding, with steady hand, the canoe. Neither of them could guess at what speed they traveled this first wild half-hour; but he knew that the long miles—so heart-breaking with their ridges and brush thickets to men and horses—were whipping past them each in a few, little breaths. Ever they plunged deeper into the secret, hushed heart of the wild—a land unknown to the tread of white men, a region so still and changeless that it seemed excluded from the reign and law of, time. The spruce grew here, straight and dark and tall, a stalwart army whose measureless march no human eyes beheld. Already they had come farther than a pack train could travel, through the same region, in weary days.

Already they were at the border of Back There. They had cut the last ties with the world of men. There were no trails here, leading slowly but immutably to the busy centers of civilization; not a blaze on a tree for the eyes of a woodsman riding on some forest

venture, not the ashes of a dead camp fire or a charred cooking rack, where an Indian had broiled his caribou flesh. Except by the slow process of exploration

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with pack horses, traveling a few miles each day, fording unknown rivers and encircling impassable ranges, or by waiting patiently until the fall rains swelled the river, they might never leave this land they had so boldly entered. They could not go out the way they had come—over those seething waters—and the river, falling swiftly, would soon be too low to permit them to push down to its lower waters where they might find Indian encampments.

Nothing was left but the wilderness, ancient and unchanged. The spruce forest had a depth and a darkness that even Ben had never seen; the wild creatures that they sometimes glimpsed on the bank stared at them wholly without knowledge as to what they were, and likely amazed at the strength whereby they had braved this seething torrent that swept through their sylvan home. Here was a land where the grizzly had not yet learned of a might greater than his, where he had not yet surrendered his sovereignty to man. Here the moose—mightiest of the antlered herd—reached full maturity and old age without ever mistaking the call of a birch-bark horn for that of his rutting cow. Young bulls with only a fifty-inch spread of horns and ten points on each did not lead the herds, as in the more accessible provinces of the North. All things were in their proper balance, since the forest had gone unchanged for time immemorial; and as the head-hunters had not yet come the bull moose did not rank as a full-grown warrior until he wore thirty points and had five feet of spread, and he wasn't a patriarch until he could no longer walk free between two tree trunks seventy inches apart. Certain of the lesser forest people were not in unwonted numbers because that fierce little hunter, the marten, had been exterminated by trappers; the otter, yet to know the feel of cold iron, fished to his heart's content in rivers where an artificial fly had never fallen and the trout swarmed in uncounted numbers in the pools.

Darting down the rapids Ben felt the beginnings of an exquisite exhilaration. Part of it arose from the very thrill and excitement of their headlong pace; but partly it had a deeper, more portentous origin. Here was his own country—this Back There. While all the spruce forest in which he had lived had been his natural range and district—his own kind of land with which he felt close and intimate relations—this was even more his home than his own birthplace. By light of a secret quality, hard to recognize, he was of it, and it was of him. He felt the joy of one who sees the gleam of his own hearth through a distant window.

He *knew* this land; it was as if he had simply been away, through the centuries, and had come home. The shadows and the stillness had the exact depth and tone that was true and right; the forest fragrance was undefiled; the dark sky line was like something he had dreamed come true. He felt a strange and growing excitement, as if magnificent adventure were opening out before him. His gaze fell, with a queer sense of understanding, to Fenris.

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The wolf had recovered from his fear of the river, by now, and he was crouched, alert and still, in his place. His gaze was fast upon the shore line; and the green and yellow fires that mark the beast were ablaze again in his eyes. Fenris too made instinctive response to those breathless forests; and Ben knew that the bond between them was never so close as now.

Fenris also knew that here was his own realm, the land in which the great Fear had not yet laid its curse. The forest still thronged with game, the wood trails would be his own. Here was the motherland, not only to him but to his master, too. They were its fierce children: one by breed, the other because he answered, to the full, the call of the wild from which no man is wholly immune.

Ben could have understood the wolf's growing exultation. The war he was about to wage with Neilson, would be on his own ground, in a land that enhanced and developed his innate, natural powers, and where he had every advantage. The wolf does not run into the heart of busy cities in pursuit of his prey. He tries to decoy it into his own fastnesses.

A sudden movement on the part of Beatrice, in the bow of the canoe, caught his eye. She had leaned forward and was reaching among the supplies. His mind at once leaped to the box of shells for her pistol that he had thrown among the duffle, but evidently this was not the object of her search. She lifted into her hands a paper parcel, the same she had brought from her cabin early that morning.

He tried to analyze the curious mingling of emotions in her face. It was neither white with disdain nor dark with wrath; and the tears were gone from her eyes. Rather her expression was speculative, pensive. Presently her eyes met his.

His heart leaped; why he did not know. "What is, it?" he asked.

"Ben—I called you that yesterday and there's no use going back to last names now—I've made an important decision."

"I hope it's a happy one," he ventured.

"It's as happy as it can be, under the circumstances. Ben, I came of a line of frontiersmen—the forest people—and if the woods teach one thing it is to make the best of any bad situation."

Ben nodded. For all his long training he had not entirely mastered this lesson himself, but he knew she spoke true.

"We've found out how hard Fate can hit—if I can make it plain," she went on. "We've found out there are certain powers—or devils—or something else, and what I don't know—that are always lying in wait for people, ready to strike them down. Maybe you

would call it Destiny. But the Destiny city men know isn't the Destiny we know out here—I don't have to tell you that. We see Nature just as she is, without any gay clothes, and we know the cruelty behind her smile, and the evil plans behind her gentle words."

The man was amazed. Evidently the stress and excitement of the morning had brought out the fanciful and poetic side of the girl's nature.

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"We don't look for good luck," she told him. "We don't expect to live forever. We know what death is, and that it is sure to come, and that misfortune comes always—in the snow and the cold and the falling tree—and when we have good luck we're glad—we don't take it for granted. Living up here, where life is real, we've learned that we have to make the best of things in order to be happy at all."

"And you mean—you're going to try to make the best of *this*?" His voice throbbed ever so slightly, because he could not hold it even.

"There's nothing else I can do," she replied. "You've taken me here and as yet I don't see how I can get away. This doesn't mean I've gone over to your side."

He nodded. He understood *that* very well.

"I'm just admitting that at present I'm in your hands—helpless—and many long weeks in before us," she went on. "I'm on my father's side, last and always, and I'll strike back at you if the chance comes. Expect no mercy from me, in case I ever see my way to strike."

The man's eyes suddenly gleamed. "Don't you know—that you'd have a better chance of fighting me—if you didn't put me on guard?"

"I don't think so. I don't believe you'd be fooled that easy. Besides—I can't pretend to be a friend—when I'm really an enemy."

For one significant instant the man looked down. This was what he had done—pretended friendship when he was a foe. But his was a high cause!

"I'm warning you that I'm against you to the last—and will beat you if I see my way," the girl went on. "But at the same time I'm going to make the best of a bad situation, and try to get all the comfort I can. I'm in your hands at present, and we're foes, but just the same we can talk, and try to make each other comfortable so that we can be comfortable ourselves, and try not to be any more miserable than we can help. I'm not going to cry any more."

As she talked she was slowly unwrapping the little parcel she had brought. Presently she held it out to him.

It was just a box of homemade candy—fudge made with sugar and canned milk—that she had brought for their day's picnic. But it was a peace offering not to be despised. A heavy load lifted from Ben's heart.

He waited his chance, guiding the boat with care, and then reached a brown hand. He crushed a piece of the soft, delicious confection between his lips. "Thanks, Beatrice," he said. "I'll remember all you've told me."

XXIII

It is a peculiar fact that no one is more deeply moved by the great works and phenomena of nature than those who live among them. It is the visitor from distant cities, or the callow youth with tawdry clothes and tawdry thoughts who disturbs the great silences and austerity of majestic scenes with half-felt effusive words or cheap impertinences. Oddly enough, the awe that the wilderness dweller knows at the sight of some great, mysterious canyon or towering peak seems to increase, rather than decrease, with familiarity. His native scenes never grow old to him. Their beauty and majesty is eternal.

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Perhaps the reason lies in the fact that the native woodsman knows nature as she really is: living ever close to her he knows her power over his life. Perhaps there is a religious side to the matter, too. In the solitudes the religious instincts receive an impulse that is impossible to those who know only the works of man. The religion that this gives is true and deep, and the eye instinctively lifts in reverence to the manifestations of divine might.

When the swirling waters carried the canoe down into the gorge of the Yuga both Ben and Beatrice were instinctively awed and stilled. Ever the walls of the gorge grew more steep, until the sunlight was cut off and they rode as if in twilight. The stone of the precipices presented a marvellous array of color; and the spruce, almost black in the subdued light, stood in startling contrast. Ben saw at once that even were they able to land they could not—until they had emerged from the gorge—climb to the highlands. A mountain goat, most hardy of all mountaineers, could scarcely scale the abrupt wall.

During this time of half-light they saw none of the larger forest creatures that at first had gazed at them with such wonder from the banks. The reason was simply that they could not descend and ascend the steep walls.

Mostly Ben had time only for an occasional glimpse at the colossus above him. His work was to guide the craft between the perilous boulders. Occasionally the river slackened its wild pace, and at such times he stretched his arms and rested his straining eyes.

Both had largely forgotten the danger of the ride. Because she was trying bravely to make the best of a tragic situation Beatrice had resolved to keep danger from her thoughts. Ben had known from the first that danger was an inevitable element in his venture, and he accepted it just as he had considered it,—with entire coldness. Yet both of them knew, in their secret thoughts, that the balance of life and death was so fine that the least minor incident might cast them into darkness. It would not have to be a great disaster, a wide departure from the commonplace. They were traveling at a terrific rate of speed, and a sharp rock too close to the surface would rip the bottom from their craft. Any instant might bring the shock and shudder of the end.

There would scarcely be time to be afraid. Both would be hurled into the stream; and the wild waters, pounding against the rocks, would close the matter swiftly. It awed them and humbled them to realize with what dispatch and ease this wilderness power could snuff out their mortal lives. There would be no chance to fight back, no element of uncertainty in the outcome. Here was a destiny against which the strength of man was as thistledown in the wind! The thought was good spiritual medicine for Ben, just as it would have been for most other men, and his egoism died a swift and natural death.

One crash, one shock, and then the darkness and silence of the end! The river would rage on, unsatiated by their few pounds of flesh, storming by in noble fury; but no man

would know whither they had gone and how they had died. The walls of the gorge would not tremble one whit, or notice; and the spruce against the sky would not bow their heads to show that they had seen.

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But the canyon broke at last, and the craft emerged into the sunlight. It was good to see the easy slope of the hills again, the spruce forests, and the forms of the wild creatures on the river bank, startled by their passing. Noon came and passed, and for lunch they ate the last of the fudge. And now a significant change was manifest in both of them.

Psychologists are ever astounded at the ability of mortals, men and animals, to become adjusted to any set of circumstances. The wax of habit sets almost in a day. The truth was, that in a certain measure with very definite and restricted limits, both Ben and Beatrice were becoming adjusted even to this amazing situation in which they found themselves. This did not mean that Beatrice was in the least degree reconciled to it. She had simply accepted it with the intention of making the best of it. She had been abducted by an enemy of her father and was being carried down an unknown and dangerous river; but the element of surprise, the life of which is never but a moment, was already passing away. Sometimes she caught herself with a distinct start, remembering everything with a rage and a bitter load on her heart; but the mood would pass quickly.

It is impossible, through any ordinary change of fortune, for a normal person to lose his sense of self-identity. As long as that remains exterior conditions can make no vital change, or make him feel greatly different than he felt before. The change from a peasant to a millionaire brings only a moment's surprise, and then readjustment. Beatrice was still herself; the man in the stern remained Ben Darby and no one else. Very naturally she began to talk to him, and he to answer her.

The fact that they were bitter foes, one the victim of the other, did not decree they could not have friendly conversation, isolated as they were. From time to time Ben pointed out objects of interest on the shore; and she found herself remarking, in a casual voice, about them. And before the afternoon he had made her laugh, in spite of herself,—a gay sound in which fear and distress had little echo.

"We're bound to see a great deal of each other in the next few weeks," he had said; and this fact could not be denied. The sooner both became adjusted to it the better. Actual fear of him she had none; she remembered only too well the steel in his eyes and the white flame on his cheeks as he had assured her of her safety.

In mid-afternoon Ben began to think of making his night's camp. From time to time the bank became an upright precipice where not even a tree could find foothold; and it had occurred to him, with sudden vividness, that he did not wish the darkness to overtake him in such a place. The river rocks would make short work of him, in that case. It was better to pick out a camp site in plenty of time lest they could not find one at the day's end.

In one of the more quiet stretches of water he saw the place—a small cove and a green, tree-clad bank, with the gorge rising behind. Handling his canoe with greatest care he

slanted toward it. A moment later he had caught the brush at the water's edge, stepped off into shallow water, and was drawing the canoe up onto the bank.

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"We're through for the day," he said happily, as he helped Beatrice out of the boat. "I'll confess I'm ready to rest."

Beatrice made no answer because her eyes were busy. Coolly and quietly she took stock of the situation, trying to get an idea of the geographical features of the camp site. She saw in a glance, however, that there was no path to freedom up the gorge behind her. The rocks were precipitate: besides, she remembered that over a hundred miles of impassable wilderness lay between her and her father's cabin. Without food and supplies she could not hope to make the journey.

The racing river, however, awakened a curious, inviting train of thought. The torrent continued largely unabated for at least one hundred miles more, she knew, and the hours that it would be passable in a canoe were numbered. The river had fallen steadily all day; driftwood was left on the shore; rocks dried swiftly in the sun, cropping out like fangs above the foam of the stream. Was there still time to drift on down the Yuga a hundred or more miles to the distant Indian encampment? She shut the thought from her mind, at present, and turned her attention to the work of making camp.

With entire good humor she began to gather such pieces of dead wood as she could find for their fire.

"Your prisoner might as well make herself useful," she said.

Ben's face lighted as she had not seen it since their outward journey from Snowy Gulch. "Thank God you're taking it that way, Beatrice," he told her fervently. "It was a proposition I couldn't help—"

But the girl's eyes flashed, and her lips set in a hard line. "I'm doing it to make my own time go faster," she told him softly, rather slowly. "I want you to remember that."

But instantly both forgot their words to listen to a familiar clucking sound from a near-by shrub. Peering closely they made out the plump, genial form of Franklin's grouse,—a bird known far and wide in the north for her ample breast and her tender flesh.

"Good Lord, there's supper!" Ben whispered. "Beatrice, get your pistol—"

Her eyes smiled as she looked him in the face. "You remember—my pistol isn't loaded!"

"Excuse me. I forgot. Give it to me."

She handed him the little gun, and he slipped in the shells he had taken from it. Then—for the simple and sensible reason that he didn't want to take any chance on the loss of their dinner—he stole within twenty feet of the bird. Very carefully he drew down on the plump neck.

“Dinner all safe,” he remarked rather gayly, as the grouse came tumbling through the branches.

XXIV

Quietly Beatrice retrieved the bird and began to remove its feathers. Ben built the fire, chopped sturdily at a half-grown spruce until it shattered to the earth, and then chopped it into lengths for fuel. When the fire was blazing bright, he cut away the green branches and laid them, stems overlapping, into a fragrant bed.

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"Here's where you sleep to-night, Beatrice," he informed her.

She stopped in her work long enough to try the springy boughs with her arms; then she gave him an answering smile. Even a tenderfoot can make some sort of a comfortable pallet out of evergreen boughs—ends overlapping and plumes bent—but a master woodsman can fashion a veritable cradle, soft as silk with never a hard limb to irritate the flesh, and yielding as a hair mattress. Such softness, with the fragrance of the balsam like a sleeping potion, can not help but bring sweet dreams.

Ben had been wholly deliberate in the care with which he had built the pallet. He had simply come to the conclusion that she was paying a high price for her father's sins; and from now on he intended to make all things as easy as he could for her. Moreover, she had been a sportswoman of the rarest breed and merited every kindness he could do for her.

He was not half so careful with his own bed, built sixty feet on the opposite side of the fire. He threw it together rather hastily. And when he walked back to the fire he found an amazing change.

Already Beatrice had established sovereignty over the little patch of ground they had chosen for the camp,—and the wilderness had drawn back. This spot was no longer mere part of the far-spreading, trackless wilds. It had been set off and marked so that the wilderness creatures could no longer mistake it for part of their domain. Over the fire she had erected a cooking rack; and water was already boiling in a small bucket suspended from it. In another container a fragrant mixture was in the process of cooking. She had spread one of the blankets on the grass for a tablecloth.

As twilight lowered they sat down to their simple meal,—tea, sweetened with sugar, and vegetables and meat happily mingled in a stew. It was true that the vegetable end was held up by white grains of rice alone, but the meat was the white, tender flesh of grouse, permeating the entire dish with its tempting flavor. As a whole, the stew was greatly satisfying to the inner man.

"I wish I'd brought more tea," Ben complained, as he sipped that most delightful of all drinks, the black tea beloved of the northern men.

"You a woodsman, and don't know how to remedy that!" the girl responded. "I know of a native substitute that's almost as good as the real article."

About the embers of the fire they sat and watched the tremulous wings of night close round them. The copse grew breathless. The distant trees blended into shadow, the nearer trunks dimmed and finally faded; the large, white northern stars emerged in infinite troops and companies, peering down through the rifts in the trees. Here about their fire they had established the domain of man. For a few short hours they had

routed the forces of the wilderness; but the foe pressed close upon them. Just at the fluctuating ring of firelight he waited, clothed in darkness and mystery,—the infinite, brooding spirit of the ancient forest.

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They had never known such silence, broken only by the prolonged chord of the river, as descended upon them now. It was new and strange to the conscious life of Ben, himself, the veritable offspring of the woods; although infinitely old and familiar to a still, watching, secret self within him. It was as if he had searched forever for this place and had just found it, and it answered, to the full, a queer mood of silence in his own heart. The wind had died down now. The last wail of a coyote—disconsolate on a far-away ridge—had trembled away into nothingness; the voices of the Little People who had chirped and rustled in the tree aisles during the daylight hours were stilled with a breathless, dramatic stillness. Such sound as remained over the interminable breadth of that dark forest was only the faint stirrings and rustlings of the beasts of prey going to their hunting; and this was only a moving tone in the great chord of silence.

To Ben the falling night brought a return of his most terrible moods. Beatrice sensed them in his pale, set face and his cold, wolfish eyes. The wolf sat beside him, swept by his master's mood, gazing with deadly speculations into the darkness. Beatrice saw them as one breed to-night. The wild had wholly claimed this repatriated son. The paw of the Beast was heavy upon him; the softening influences of civilization seemed wholly dispelled. There was little here to remind her that this was the twentieth century. The primitive that lies just under the skin in all men was in the ascendancy; and there was little indeed to distinguish him from the hunter of long ago, a grizzled savage at the edge of the ice who chased the mammoth and wild pony, knowing no home but the forest and no gentleness unknown to the wolf that ran at his heels.... The tenderness and sympathy he had had for her earlier that day seemed quite gone now. She searched for it in vain in the dark and savage lines of his pale face.

Because it has always been that the happiness of women must depend upon the mood of men, her own spirits fell. The despair that descended upon her brought also resentment and rage; and soon she slipped away quietly to her bed. She drew the blankets over her face; but no tears wet her cheeks to-night. She was dry-eyed, thoughtful—full of vague plans.

She lay awake a long time, until at last a little, faint ray of hope beamed bright and clear. More than a hundred miles farther down the Yuga, past the mouth of Grizzly River, not far from the great, north-flowing stream of which the Yuga was a tributary, lay an Indian village—and if only she could reach it she might enlist the aid of the natives and make a safe return, by a long, roundabout route, to her father's arms. The plan meant deliverance from Ben and the defeat of all his schemes of vengeance,—perhaps the salvation of her father and his subordinates.

She realized perfectly the reality of her father's danger. She had read the iron resolve in Ben's face. She knew that if she failed to make an immediate escape from him, all his dreadful plans were likely to succeed: his enemies would follow him into the unexplored mazes of Back There to effect her rescue and fall helpless in his trap. What quality of mercy he would extend to them then she could readily guess.

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Just to get down to the Indian village: this was her whole problem. But it was Ben's plan to land and enter the interior somewhere in the vast wilderness between, from which escape could not be made until the flood waters of fall. The way would remain open but a few hours more, due to the simple fact that the waters were steadily falling and the river-bottom crags, forming impassable barriers at some points, would be exposed. *If she made her escape at all it must be soon.*

Yet she could not attempt it at night. She could not see to guide the canoe while the darkness lay over the river. Just one further chance remained—to depart in the first gray of dawn.

She fell into troubled sleep, but true to her resolution, wakened when the first ribbon of light stretched along the eastern horizon. She sat up, laying the blankets back with infinite care. This was her chance: Ben still lay asleep.

Just to steal down to the water's edge, push off the canoe, and trust her life to the doubtful mercy of the river. The morning soon would break; if she could avoid the first few crags, she had every chance to guide her craft through to deliverance and safety. By no conceivable chance could Ben follow her. He would be left in the shadow of the gorge, a prisoner without hope or prayer of deliverance. There was no crossing the cliffs that lifted so stern and gray just behind. Before he could build any kind of a craft with axe and fire, the waters would fall to a death level, beyond any hope of carrying him to safety. The tables would be turned; he would be left as helpless to follow her as Neilson had been to follow him.

The plan meant deliverance for her; but surely it meant *death* to him. Starvation would drive him to the river and destruction, before men could ever come the long way to rescue him. But this was not her concern. She was a forest girl and he her enemy: he must pay the price for his own deeds.

She got to her feet, stalking with absolute silence. She must not waken him now. Softly she pressed her unshod foot into the grass. He stirred in his sleep; and she paused, scarcely breathing.

She looked toward him. Dimly she could see his face, tranquil in sleep and gray in the soft light; and an instantaneous surge of remorse sped through her. There was a sweetness, a hint of kindly boyishness in his face now, so changed since she had left him beside the glowing coals. Yet he was her deadly enemy; and she must not let her woman's heart cost her her victory in its moment of fulfillment. She crept on down to the water.

She could discern the black shadow of the canoe. One swift surge of her shoulders, one leap, the splash of the stern in the water and the swift stroke of the paddle, and she would be safe. She stepped nearer.

But at that instant a subdued note of warning froze her in her tracks. It was only a small sound, hushed and hardly sharp enough to arouse Ben from his sleep; but it was deadly, savage, unutterably sinister. She had forgotten that Ben did not wage war alone. For the moment she had given no thought to his terrible ally,—a pack brother faithful to the death.

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A great, gaunt form raised up from the pile of duffle in the canoe; and his fangs showed ivory white in the wan light. It was Fenris, and he guarded the canoe. He crouched, ready to spring if she drew near.

The girl sobbed once, then stole back to her blankets.

XXV

Ben wakened refreshed, at peace with the world as far as he could ever be until his ends were attained; and immediately built a roaring fire. Beatrice still slept, exhausted from the stress and suspense of her attempt to escape. When the leaping flames had dispelled the frost from the grass about the fire Ben stepped to her side and touched her shoulder.

"It's time to get up and go on," he said. "We have only a few hours more of travel."

It was true. The river had fallen appreciably during the night. Not many hours remained in which to make their permanent landing. Although the river was somewhat less violent from this point on, the lower water line would make traveling practically as perilous as on the preceding day.

The girl opened her eyes. "I'd rather hoped—I had dreamed it all," she told him miserably.

The words touched him. He looked into her face, moved by the girlishness and appeal about the red, wistful mouth and the dark, brimming eyes. "It's pretty tough, but I'm afraid it's true," he said, more kindly than he had spoken since they had left the landing. "Do you want me to cook breakfast and bring it to you here?"

"No, I want to do that part myself. It makes the time pass faster to have something to do."

He went to look for fresh meat, and she slipped into her outer garments. She found water already hot in a bucket suspended from the cooking rack, permitting a simple but refreshing toilet. With Ben's comb she straightened out the snarls in her dark tresses, parted them, and braided them into two dusky ropes to be worn Indian fashion in front of her shoulders. Then she prepared the meal.

It was a problem to tax the ingenuity of any housekeeper,—to prepare an appetizing breakfast out of such limited supplies. But in this art, particularly, the forest girls are trained. A quantity of rice had been left from the stew of the preceding night, and mixing it with flour and water and salt, she made a batter. Sooner or later fresh fat could be obtained from game to use in frying: to-day she saw no course other than to melt a

piece of candle. The reverberating roar of the rifle a hundred yards down the river bank, however, suggested another alternative.

A moment later Ben appeared—and the breakfast problem was solved. It was another of the woods people that his rifle had brought down,—one that wore fur rather than feathers and which had just come in from night explorations along the river bank. It was a yearling black bear—really no larger than a cub—and he had an inch of fat under his furry hide.

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The fat he yielded was not greatly different from lard; and the pancakes—or fritters, as Ben termed them—were soon frying merrily. Served with hot tea they constituted a filling and satisfactory breakfast for both travelers.

After breakfast they took to the river, yielding themselves once more to the whims of the current. Once more the steep banks whipped past them in ever-changing vista; and Ben had to strain at his paddle to guide the craft between the perilous crags. The previous day the high waters had carried them safely above the boulders of the river bed: to-day some of the larger crags all but scraped the bottom of the canoe. It did not tend toward peace of mind to know that any instant they might encounter a submerged crag that would rip their craft in twain. Ben felt a growing eagerness to land.

But within an hour they came out once more upon the open forest. The river broadened, sped less swiftly, the bank sloped gradually to the distant hills. This was the heart of Back There,—a virgin and primeval forest unchanged since the piling-up of the untrodden ranges. The wild pace of the craft was checked, and they kept watch for a suitable place to land.

There was no need to push on through the seething cataracts that lay still farther below. Shortly before the noon hour Ben's quick eye saw a break in the heavy brushwood that lined the bank and quickly paddled toward it. In a moment it was revealed as the mouth, of a small, clear stream, flowing out of a beaver meadow where the grass was rank and high. In a moment more he pushed the canoe into the mud of the creek bank.

They both got out, rather sober of mien, and she helped him haul the canoe out upon the bank. They unloaded it quickly, carrying the supplies in easy loads fifty yards up into the edge of the forest, on well-drained dry ground.

The entire forest world was hushed and breathless, as if startled by this intrusion. Neither of the two travelers felt inclined to speak. And the silence was finally broken by the splashing feet of a moose, running through a little arm of the marsh that the forest hid from view.

"Is this our permanent camp?" the girl asked at last.

"Surely not," was the reply. "It's too near the river for one thing—too easily found. It's too low, too—there'll be mosquitoes in plenty in that marsh two months from now. The first thing is—to look around and find a better site."

"You want me to come?"

"I'd rather, if you don't mind."

She understood perfectly. He did not intend to give her complete freedom until the river fell so low that the rapids farther down would be wholly impassable.

"I'll come." Beatrice smiled grimly. "We can have that picnic we planned, after all."

They found a moose trail leading into the forest, and leaving the wolf on guard over the supplies, they filed swiftly along it in that peculiar, shuffling, mile-speeding gait that all foresters learn. At once both were aware of a subdued excitement. In the first place, this was unknown country and they experienced the incomparable thrill of exploration. Besides they were seeking a permanent camp where their fortunes would be cast, the drama of their lives be enacted, for weeks to come.

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Almost at once they began to catch glimpses of wild life,—a squirrel romping on a limb; or a long line of grouse, like children in school, perched on a fallen log. The trapper had not yet laid his lines in this land, and the tracks of the little fur-bearers weaved a marvelous and intricate pattern on the moose trail. Once a marten with orange throat peered at them from a covert, and once a caribou raced away, too fast for a shot.

Mostly the wild things showed little fear or understanding of the two humans. The grouse relied on their protective coloration, just as when menaced by the beasts of prey. An otter, rarely indeed seen in daylight, hovered a moment beside a little stream to consider them; and a coyote, greatest of all cowards, lingered in their trail until they were within fifty feet of his grey form, then trotted shyly away.

"We won't starve for meat, that's certain," Ben informed her. His voice was subdued; he had fallen naturally into the mood of quietness that dwells ever in the primeval forest.

Because the trail seemed to be leading them too far from the waterways, they took a side trail circling about a wooded hill. Ever Ben studied the landmarks, looked carefully down the draws and tried to learn as much as possible of the geography of the country; and Beatrice understood his purpose with entire clearness. He wished to locate his camp so that it would have every natural advantage and insurance against surprise attack. He desired that every advantage of warfare be in his favor when finally he came to grips with Neilson and his men.

They crossed a low ridge, following down another of the thousand creeks that water the northern lands. In a moment it led them to a long, narrow lake, blue as a sapphire in its frame of dusky spruce.

For a moment both of them halted on its bank, held by its virgin beauty. Lost in the solitudes as it was, perhaps never before gazed upon by the eyes of men, still it gave no impression of bleakness and stagnation. Rather it was a scene of scintillating life, vivid past all expression. Far out of range on the opposite shore a huge bull moose stood like a statue in black marble, gazing out over the shimmering expanse. Trout leaped, flashing silver, anywhere they might look; and a flock of loon shrieked demented cries from its center. The burnished wings of a flock of mallard flashed in the air, startled by some creeping hunter.

Slowly, delighted in spite of themselves by the lovely spot, they followed along its shore. They climbed the bank; and now Ben began to examine his surroundings with great care.

He had suddenly realized that he was in a region wonderfully fitted for his permanent camp. The low ridge between the lake and the creek gave a clear view of a large part of the surrounding country, affording him every chance of seeing his enemies before they saw him. If they came along the river—the course they would naturally follow—

they would be obliged to cross the beaver marsh—a half-mile of open grassland with no protecting coverts. Beatrice saw, dismayed, that his gray eyes were kindling with unholy fire under his heavy, dark brows.

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What if he should see them, deep in the wet grass, filing across the open marsh! How many shots would be needed to bring his war to a triumphant end? There were no thickets in which they might find shelter: hidden himself, they could not return his fire. Before they could break and run to cover he could destroy them all!

Should they cross the narrow neck of the marsh, higher up, he would have every chance to see them on the lake shore. The site was good from the point of health and comfort—high enough to escape the worst of the insect pests, close to fresh water, plenty of fuel, and within a few hundred yards of a lake that simply swarmed with fish and waterfowl.

Still following a narrow, racing trout stream that flowed into the lake they advanced a short distance farther, clear to the base of a rock wall. And all at once Beatrice, walking in front, drew up with a gasp.

She stood at the edge of a little glade, perhaps thirty yards across, laying at the base of the cliff. The creek flowed through it, the grass was green and rich, beloved by the antlered herds that came to graze, the tall spruce shaded it on three sides. But it was not these things that caught the girl's eye. Just at the edge of a glade a dark hole yawned in the face of the cliff.

In an instant more they were beside it, gazing into its depths. It was a natural cavern with rock walls and a clean floor of sand—a roomy place, and yet a perfect stronghold against either mortal enemies or the powers of wind and rain.

"It's home," the man said simply.

XXVI

Ben and Beatrice went together back to the canoe, and in two trips they carried the supplies to the cave. By instinct a housekeeper, Beatrice showed him where to stow the various supplies, what part of the cave was to be used for provisions, where their cots would be laid, and where to erect the cooking rack. Shadows had fallen over the land before they finished the work.

Tired from the hard tramp, yet sustained by a vague excitement neither of them could name or trace, they began to prepare for the night. Ben cut boughs as before, placing Beatrice's bed within the portals of the cave and his own on the grass outside. He cut fuel and made his fire: Beatrice prepared the evening meal.

The flesh of the cub-bear they had procured that morning would have to serve them to-night; but more delicious meat could be procured to-morrow. Ben knew that the white-maned caribou fed in the high park lands. Beatrice made biscuits and brewed tea; and

they ate the simple food in the firelight. Already the darkness was pressing close upon them, tremulous, vaguely sinister, inscrutably mysterious.

They had talked gayly at first; but they grew silent as the fire burned down to coals. A great preoccupation seemed to hold them both. When one spoke the other started, and word did not immediately come in answer. Beatrice's despair was not nearly so dominating to-night; and Ben harbored a secret excitement that was almost happiness.

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Its source and origin Ben could not trace. Perhaps it was just relief that the perilous journey was over. The strain of his hours at the paddle had been severe; but now they were safe upon the sustaining earth. Yet this fact alone could hardly have given him such a sense of security,—an inner comfort new to his adventurous life.

The forest was oppressive to-night, tremulous with the passions of the Young World; yet he did not respond to it as before. The excitement that sparkled in the red wine of his veins was not of the chase and death, and he had difficulty in linking it up with the thoughts of his forthcoming vengeance. Rather it was a mood that sprang from their surroundings here, their shelter at the mouth of the cave. He felt deeply at peace.

The fire blazed warmly at the cavern maw; the wolf stood tense and still, by means of the secret wireless of the wild fully aware of the tragic drama, the curtain of which was the dark just fallen; yet Ben's wild, bitter thoughts of the preceding night did not come readily back to him. There was a quality here—in the firelight and the haven of the cave—that soothed him and comforted him. The powers of the wild were helpless against him now. The wind might hurl down the dead trees, but the rock of the cavern Wall would stand against them. Even the dreaded avalanche could roar and thunder on the steep above in vain.

There was no peril in the hushed, breathless forest for him to-night. This was his stronghold, and none could assail it. And it was a significant fact that his sense of intimate relationship with the wolf, Fenris, was somehow lessened. Fenris was a creature of the open forest, sleeping where he chose on the trail; but his master had found a cavern home. There was a strange and bridgeless chasm between such breeds as roamed abroad and those that slept, night after night, in the shelter of the same walls.

He watched the girl's face, ruddy in the firelight, and it was increasingly hard to remember that she was of the enemy camp,—the daughter of his arch foe. To-night she was just a comrade, a habitat of his own cave.

For the first time since he had found Ezram's body—so huddled and impotent in the dead leaves—he remembered the solace of tobacco. He hunted through his pockets, found his pipe and a single tin of the weed, and began to inhale the fragrant, peace-giving smoke. When he raised his eyes again he found the girl studying him with intent gaze.

She looked away, embarrassed, and he spoke to put her at ease. "You are perfectly comfortable, Beatrice?" he asked gently.

"As good as I could expect—considering everything. I'm awfully relieved that we're off the water."

“Of course.” He paused, looking away into the tremulous shadows. “Is that all? Don’t you feel something else, too—a kind of satisfaction?”

The coals threw their lurid glow on her lovely, deeply tanned face. “It’s for you to feel satisfaction, not me. You couldn’t expect me to feel very satisfied—taken from my home—as a hostage—in a feud with my father. But I think I know what you mean. You mean—the comfort of the fire, and a place to stay.”

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"That's it. Of course."

"I feel it—but every human being does who has a fire when this big, northern night comes down and takes charge of things. It's just an instinct, I suppose, a comfort and a feeling of safety—and likely only the wild beasts are exempt from it." Her voice changed and softened, as her girlish fancy reached ever farther. "I suppose the first men that you were telling me about on the way out, the hairy men of long ago, felt the same way when the cold drove them to their caves for the first time. A great comfort in the protecting walls and the fire."

"It's an interesting thought—that perhaps the love of home sprang from that hour."

"Quite possibly. Perhaps it came only when they had to fight for their homes—against beasts, and such other hairy men as tried to take their homes away from them. Perhaps, after all, that's one of the great differences between men and beasts. Men have a place to live in and a place to fight for—and the fire is the symbol of it all. And the beasts run in the forest and make a new lair every day."

Thoughts of the stone age were wholly fitting in this stone-age forest, and Ben's fancy caught on fire quickly. "And perhaps, when the hairy men came to the caves to live, they forgot their wild passions they knew on the open trails—their blood-lust and their wars among themselves—and began to be men instead of beasts." Ben's voice had dropped to an even, low murmur. "Perhaps they got gentle, and the Brute died in their bodies."

"Yes. Perhaps then they began to be tamed."

The silence dropped about them, settling slowly; and all except the largest heap of red coals burned down to gray ashes. The darkness pressed ever nearer. The girl stretched her slender, brown arms.

"I'm sleepy," she said. "I'm going in."

He got up, with good manners; and he smiled, quietly and gently, into her sober, wistful face. "Sleep good," he prayed. "You've got solid walls around you to-night—and some one on guard, too. Good night."

A like good wish was on her lips, but she pressed it back. She had almost forgotten, for the moment, that this man was her abductor and her father's enemy. She ventured into the darkness of the cave.

Scratching a match Ben followed her, so that she could see her way. For the instant the fireside was deserted. And then both of them grew breathless and alert as the brush cracked and rustled just beyond the glowing coals.

Some huge wilderness creature was venturing toward them, at the edge of the little glade.

XXVII

The match flared out in Ben's fingers, and the only light that was left was the pale moonlight, like a cobweb on the floor of the glade, and the faint glow from the dying fire. About the glade ranged the tall spruce, Watching breathlessly; and for a termless second or two a profound and portentous silence descended on the camp. No leaf rustled, not a tree limb cracked. The creature that had pushed through the thickets to the edge of the glade was evidently standing motionless, deciding on his course.

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Only the wild things seem to know what complete absence of motion means. To stand like a form in rock, not a muscle quivering or a hair stirring, is never a feat for ragged, over stretched human nerves; and it requires a perfect muscle control that is generally only known to the beasts of the forest. Only a few times in a lifetime in human beings are the little, outward motions actually suspended; perhaps under the paralysis of great terror or, with painstaking effort, before a photographer's camera. But with the beasts it is an everyday accomplishment necessary to their survival. The fawn that can not stand absolutely motionless, his dappled skin blending perfectly with the background of shrubbery shot with sunlight, comes to an end quickly in the fangs of some great beast of prey. The panther that can not lurk, not a muscle quivering, in his ambush beside the deer trail, never knows full feeding. The creature on the opposite side of the glade seemed as bereft of motion as the spruce trees in the moonlight, or the cliff above the cave.

"What is it?" Beatrice whispered. The man's eyes strained into the gloom.

"I don't know. It may be just a moose, or maybe a caribou. But it may be—"

He tiptoed to the door of the cave, and his eye fell to the crouching form of Fenris. The creature outside was neither moose nor caribou. The great wolf of the North does not stand at bay to the antlered people. He was poised to spring, his fangs bared and his fierce eyes hot with fire, but he was not hunting. Whatever moved in the darkness without, the wolf had no desire to go forth and attack. Perhaps he would fight to the death to protect the occupants of the cave; but surely an ancient and devastating fear had hold of him. Evidently he recognized the intruder as an ancestral enemy that held sovereignty over the forest.

At that instant Ben leaped through the cavern maw to reach his gun. There was nothing to be gained by waiting further. This was a savage and an uninhabited land; and the great beasts of prey that ranged the forest had not yet learned the restraint born of the fear of man. And he knew one breathless instant of panic when his eye failed to locate the weapon in the faint light of the fire.

Holding hard, he tried to remember where he had left it. The form across the glade was no longer motionless. Straining, Ben saw the soft roll of a great shadow, almost imperceptible in the gloom—advancing slowly toward him. Then the faint glow of the fire caught and reflected in the creature's eyes.

They suddenly glowed out in the half-darkness, two rather small circles of dark red, close together and just alike. This night visitor was not moose or caribou, or was it one of the lesser hunters, lynx or wolverine, or a panther wandered far from his accustomed haunts. The twin circles were too far above the ground. And whatever it was, no doubt remained but that the creature was steadily stalking him across the soft grass.

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At that instant Ben's muscles snapped into action. Only a second remained in which to make his defense—the creature had paused, setting his muscles for a death-dealing charge. “Go back into the cave—as far as you can,” he said swiftly to Beatrice. His own eyes, squinted and straining for the last iota of vision in that darkened scene, made a last, frantic search for his rifle. Suddenly he saw the gleam of its barrel as it rested against the wall of the cliff, fifteen feet distant.

At once he knew that his only course was to spring for it in the instant that remained, and trust to its mighty shocking power to stop the charge that would in a moment ensue. Yet it seemed to tear the life fiber of the man to do it. His inmost instincts, urgent and loud in his ear, told him to remain on guard, not to leave that cavern maw for an instant but to protect with his own body the precious life that it sheltered. His mind worked with that incredible speed that is usually manifest in a crisis; and he knew that the creature might charge into the cavern entrance in the second that he left it. Yet only in the rifle lay the least chance or hope for either of them.

“At him, Fenris!” he shouted. The wolf leaped forward like a thrown spear,—almost too fast for the eye to follow. He was deathly afraid, with full knowledge of the power of the enemy he went to combat, but his fears were impotent to restrain him at the first sound of that masterful voice. These were the words he had waited for. He could never disobey such words as these—from the lips of his god. And Ben's mind had worked true; he knew that the wolf could likely hold the creature at bay until he could seize his rifle.

In an instant it was in his hands, and he had sprung back to his post in front of the cavern maw. And presently he remembered, heartsick, that the weapon was not loaded.

For his own safety he had kept it empty on the outward journey, partly to prevent accident, partly to be sure that his prisoner could not turn it against him. But he had shells in the pocket of his jacket. His hand groped, but his reaching fingers found but one shell, dropping it swiftly into the gun. And now he knew that no time remained to seek another. The beast in the darkness had launched into the charge.

Thereafter there was only a great confusion, event piled upon event with incredible rapidity, and a whole lifetime of stress and fear lived in a single instant. The creature's first lunge carried him into the brighter moonlight; and at once Ben recognized its breed. No woodsman could mistake the high, rocking shoulders, the burly form, the wicked ears laid back against the flat, massive head, the fangs gleaming white, the long, hooked claws slashing through the turf as he ran. It was a terrible thing to see and stand against, in the half-darkness. The shadows accentuated the towering outline; and forgotten terrors, lurking, since the world was young, in the labyrinth of the germ plasm wakened and spread like icy streams through the mortal body and seemed to threaten to extinguish the warm flame of the very soul.

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The grizzly bawled as he came, an explosive, incredible storm of sound. Few indeed are the wilderness creatures that can charge in silence: muscular exertion can not alone relieve their gathered flood of madness and fury. And at once Ben sensed the impulse behind the attack. He and the girl had made their home in the grizzly's cave—perhaps the lair wherein he had hibernated through the winter and which he still slept in from time to time—and he had come to drive them out. Only death could pay for such insolence as this,—to make a night's lair in the den of his sovereignty, the grizzly.

It is not the accustomed thing for a grizzly to make an unprovoked attack. He has done it many times, in the history of the west, but usually he is glad enough to turn aside, only launching into his terrible death-charge when a mortal wound obliterates his fear of man, leaving only his fear of death. But this grizzly, native to these uninhabited wilds, had no fear of man to forget. He did not know what man was, and he had not learned the death that dwells in the shining weapon he carries in his arms. No trappers rushed through his snows of spring; no woodsman rode his winding trails. True, from the first instant that the human smell had reached him on the wind he had been disturbed and discomfited; yet it was not grizzly nature to yield his den without a fight. The sight of the wolf—known to him of old—only awakened an added rage in his fierce heart.

The wolf met him at his first leap, springing with noble courage at his grizzled throat; and the bear paused in his charge to strike him away. He lashed out with his great forepaw; and if that blow had gone straight home the ribs of the wolf would have been smashed flat on his heart and lungs. The tough trunk of a young spruce would have been broken as quickly under that terrible, blasting full-stroke of a grizzly. The largest grizzly weighs but a thousand pounds, but that weight is simple fiber and iron muscle, of a might incredible to any one but the woodsmen who know this mountain king in his native haunts. But Fenris whipped aside, and the paw missed him.

Immediately the wolf sprang in again, with a courage scarcely compatible with lupine characteristics, ready to wage this unequal battle to the death. But his brave fight was tragically hopeless. For all that his hundred and fifty pounds were, every ounce, lightning muscle and vibrant sinew, it was as if a gopher had waged war with a lynx. Yet by the law of his wild heart he could not turn and flee. His master—his stalwart god whose words thrilled him to the uttermost depths—had given his orders, and he must obey them to the end.

The second blow missed him also, but the third caught a small shrub that grew twenty feet beyond the dying fire. The shrub snapped off under the blow, and its branchy end smote the wolf across the head and neck. As if struck by a tornado he was hurled into the air, and curtailed and indirect though the blow was, he sprawled down stunned and insensible in the grass. The bear paused one instant; then lunged forth again.

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But the breath in which the wolf had stayed the charge had given Ben his chance. With a swift motion of his arm he had projected the single rifle shell into the chamber of the weapon. The stock snapped to his shoulder; and his keen, glittering eyes sought the sights.

XXVIII

Few wilderness adventures offer a more stern test to human nerves than the frightful rush of a maddened grizzly. It typifies all that is primal and savage in the wild: the insane rage that can find relief only in the cruel rending of flesh; the thundering power that no mere mortal strength can withstand. But Ben was a woodsman. He had been tried in the fire. He knew that not only his life, but that of the girl in the cavern depended upon this one shot; and it was wholly characteristic of Wolf Darby that his eye held true and his arm was steady as a vice of iron.

He was aware that he must wait until the bear was almost upon him, in order to be sure to send the bullet home to a vital place. This alone was a test requiring no small measure of self-control. The instinct was to fire at once. In the moonlight it was difficult to see his sights: his only chance was to enlarge his target to the last, outer limit of safety. He aimed for the great throat, below the slavering jaw.

His finger pressed back steadily against the trigger. The slightest flinching, the smallest motion might yet throw off his aim. The rifle spoke with a roar.

But this wilderness battle was not yet done. The ball went straight home, down through the throat, mushrooming and plowing on into the neck, inflicting a wound that was bound to be mortal within a few seconds. The bear recoiled; but the mighty engine of its life was not yet destroyed. Its incalculable fonts of vitality had not yet run down.

The grizzly bounded forward again. The ball had evidently missed the vertebrae and spinal column. His crashing, thunderous roar of pain smothered instantly the reechoing report of the rifle and stifled the instinctive cry that had come to Ben's lips. He was a forester; and he had known of old what havoc a mortally wounded bear can wreak in a few seconds of life. In that strange, vivid instant Ben knew that his own and the girl's life still hung in the balance, with the beam inclining toward death.

The grizzly was in his death-agony, nothing more; yet in that final convulsion he could rip into shreds the powerful form that opposed him. Ben knew, with a cold, sure knowledge, that if he failed to slay the beast, it would naturally crawl into its lair for its last breath. As this dreadful thought flashed home he dropped the empty rifle and seized the axe that leaned against a log of spruce beside the fire.

There was no time at all to search out another shell and load his rifle. If the shock of the heavy bullet had not slackened the bear's pace he would not even have had time to seize the axe. Finally, if the bear had not been all but dead, in his last, threshing agony, Ben's mortal strength could not have sent home one blow. As it was they found themselves facing each other over the embers of the fire, well-matched contestants whose stake was life and whose penalty was death. The grizzly turned his head, caught sight of Ben, identified him as the agent of his agony, and lurched forward.

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Just in time Ben sprang aside, out of the reach of those terrible forearms; and his axe swung mightily in the air. Its blade gleamed and descended—a blow that might have easily broken the bear's back if it had gone true but which now seemed only to infuriate him the more. The bear reared up, reeled, and lashed down; and dying though he was, he struck with incredible power. One slashing stroke of that vast forepaw, one slow closing of those cruel fangs upon skull or breast, and life would have gone out like a light. But Ben leaped aside again, and again swung down his axe.

These were but the first blows of a terrific battle that carried like a storm through the still reaches of the forest. Far in the distant tree aisles the woods people paused in their night's occupation to listen, stirred and terrified by the throb and thrill in the air; the grazing caribou lifted his growing horns and snorted in terror; the beasts of prey paused in the chase, growling uneasily, gazing with fierce, luminous eyes in the direction of the battle.

It is beyond the ken of man whether or not, in their wild hearts, these forest folk sensed what was taking place,—that their gray monarch, the sovereign grizzly, was at the death-fight with some dreadful invader from the South. They heard the bear's fierce bawls, unimitatable by any other voice as he lashed down blow after blow; and they heard the thud and crunch of the axe against his body. Had this monarch of the trails found his master at last?

Gazing out through the aperture of the cave Beatrice beheld the whole picture: the ring of spruce trees, the glade so strange and ensilvered in the moonlight, and these two fighting beasts, magnificent in fury over the embers of the dying fire. And Ben's powers increased, rather than lessened. Ever he swung his terrible axe with greater power.

He fought like the wolf that was his blood brother,—lunging, striking down, recoiling out of harm's way, and springing forward to strike again. This man was Wolf Darby, a forester known in many provinces for his woods prowess, but even those who had seen his most spectacular feats, in past days, had not appreciated the real extent of his powers. There was a fury and a might in his blows that was hard to associate with the world of human beings,—such ferociousness and wolf-like savagery, welling strength and prowess of battle that mostly men have forgotten in their centuries of civilization, but which still mark the death-fight between beasts.

Ben had always recalled the earlier types of man—his great-thewed ancestors, wild hunters in the forests of ancient Germany—but never so much as to-night. He was in his natural surroundings—at the mouth of his cave in which the Woman watched and exulted in his blows, enclosed by the primeval forest and beside the ashes of his fire. There could be nothing strange or unreal about this scene to Beatrice. It was more true than any soft vista of a far-away city could possibly be. It was life itself,—man battling for his home and his woman against the raw forces of the wild.

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All superficialities and superfluities were gone, and only the basic stuff of life remained, —the cave, the fire, the man who fought the beast in the light of the ancient moon. At that moment Ben was no more of the twentieth century than he was of the first, or of the first more than of some dark, unnumbered century of the world's young days. He was simply the male of his species, the man-child of all time, forgetting for the moment all the little lessons civilization had taught, and fighting his fight in the basic way for the basic things.

This was no new war which Ben and the grizzly fought in the pale light of the moon. It had begun when the race began, and it would continue, in varied fields, until men perished from the earth. Ben fought for *life*—not only his own but the girl's—that old, beloved privilege to breathe the air and see and know and be. He represented, by a strange symbolism, the whole race that has always fought in merciless and never-ending battle with the cruel and oppressive powers of nature. In the grizzly were typified all those ancient enemies that have always opposed, with claw and fang, this stalwart, self-knowing breed that has risen among the primates: he symbolized not only the Beast of the forest, but the merciless elements, storm and flood and cold and all the legions of death. And had they but known their ultimate fate if this intruder survived the battle and brought his fellows into this, their last stronghold, the watching forest creatures would have prayed to see the grizzly strike him to the earth.

Ben knew, too, that he was fighting for his home; and this also lent him strength. *Home!* His shelter from the storm and the cold, the thing that marked him a man instead of a beast. The grizzly had come to drive him forth; and they had met beside the ashes of his fire.

The old exhilaration and rapture of battle flashed through him as he swung his axe, sending home blow after blow. Sometimes he cried out, involuntarily, in his fury and hatred; and as the bear weakened he waged the fight at closer quarters. His muscles made marvelous response, flinging him out of danger in the instant of necessity and giving terrific power to his blows.

He danced about the shaggy, bleeding form of the bear, swinging his axe, howling in his rage, and escaping the smashing blows of the bear with miraculous agility,—a weird and savage picture in the moonlight. But at last the grizzly lunged too far. Ben sprang aside, just in time, and he saw his chance as the great, reeling form sprawled past. He aimed a terrific blow just at the base of the skull.

The silence descended quickly thereafter. The blow had gone straight home, and the last flicker of waning life fled from the titanic form. He went down sprawling; Ben stood waiting to see if another blow was needed. Then the axe fell from his hands.

For a moment he stood as if dazed. It was hard to remember all that occurred in the countless life times he had lived since the grizzly had stolen out of the spruce forest. But soon he remembered Fenris and walked unsteadily to his side.



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The wolf, however, was already recovering from the blow. He had been merely stunned; seemingly no bones were broken. Once more Ben turned to the mouth of the cavern.

Sobbing and white as the moonlight itself Beatrice met him in the doorway. She too had been uninjured; his arm had saved her from the rending fangs. She was closer to him now, filling a bigger part of his life. He didn't know just why. He had fought for her; and some way—they were more to each other.

And this was his cavern,—his stronghold of rock where he might lay his head, his haven and his hearth, and the symbol of his dominance over the beasts of the field. He had fought for this, too. And he suddenly knew a great and inner peace and a love for the sheltering walls that would dwell forever in the warp and woof of his being.

PART THREE

THE TAMING

XXIX

Ben rose at daybreak, wonderfully refreshed by the night's sleep, and built the fire at the cavern mouth. Beatrice was still asleep, and he was careful not to waken her. The days would be long and monotonous for her, he knew, and the more time she could spend in sleep the better.

He did, however, steal to the opening of the cavern and peer into her face. The soft, morning light fell gently upon it, bringing out its springtime freshness and the elusive shades of gold in her hair. She looked more a child than a woman, some one to shelter and comfort rather than to harry as a foe. "Poor little girl," he murmured under his breath. "I'm going to make it as easy for you as I can."

He meant what he said. He could do that much, at least—extend to her every courtesy and comfort that was in his power, and place his own great strength at her service.

His first work was to remove the skin of last night's invader,—the huge grizzly that lay dead just outside the cavern opening. They would have use for this warm, furry hide before their adventure was done. It would supplement their supply of blankets; and if necessary it could be cut and sewed with threads of sinew into clothes. Because the animal had but recently emerged from hibernation his fur, except for a few rubbed places, was long and rich,—a beautiful, tawny-gray that shimmered like cloth-of-gold in the light.



It taxed his strength to the utmost to roll over the huge body and skin it. When the heavy skin was removed he laid it out, intending to stretch it as soon as he could build a rack. He cut off some of the fat; then quartering the huge body, he dragged it away into the thickets.

The hour was already past ten; but Beatrice—worn out by the stress of the night before—did not waken until she heard the crack of her pistol. She lay a while, resting, watching through the cavern opening Ben's efforts to prepare breakfast. A young grouse had fallen before the pistol, and her companion was busy preparing it for the skillet.

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The girl watched with some pleasure his rather awkward efforts to go about his work in silence,—evidently still believing her asleep. She laughed secretly at his distress as he tripped clumsily over a piece of firewood; then watched him with real interest as he mixed batter for griddle cakes and fried the white breast of the grouse in bear fat. Filling one of the two tin plates he stole into the cavern.

Falling into his mood the girl pretended to be asleep. She couldn't have understood why her pulse quickened as he knelt beside her, looking so earnestly and soberly into her face. Then she felt the touch of his fingers on her shoulder.

"Wake up, Beatrice," he commanded, with pretended gruffness. "It's after ten, and you've got to cook my breakfast."

She stirred, pretending difficulty in opening her eyes.

"Get right up," he commanded again. "D'ye think I'm going to wait all morning?"

She opened her eyes to find him regarding her with boyish glee. Then—as a surprise—he proffered the filled plate, meanwhile raising his arm in feigned fear of a blow.

She laughed; then began upon her breakfast with genuine relish. Then he brought her hot water and the meager toilet articles; and left the cave to prepare his own breakfast.

"I'm going on a little hunt," he said, when this rite was over. "We can't depend on grouse and bear forever. I hate to ask you to go—"

His tone was hopeful; and she could not doubt but that the lonely spirit of these solitudes had hold of him. They were two human beings in a vast and uninhabited wilderness, and although they were foes, they felt the primitive need of each other's companionship. "I don't mind going," she told him. "I'd rather, than stay in the cave."

"It's a fine morning. And what's your favorite meat—moose or caribou?"

"Caribou—although I like both."

He might have expected this answer. There are few meats in this imperfect earth to compare in flavor with that of the great, woodland caribou, monarch of the high parklands.

"That means we do some climbing, instead of watching in the beaver meadows. I'm ready—any time."

They took the game trail up the ridge, venturing at once into the heavy spruce; but curiously enough, the mysterious hush, the dusky shadows did not appall Beatrice greatly to-day. The miles sped swiftly under her feet. Always there were creatures to



notice or laugh at,—a squirrel performing on a branch, a squawking Canada Jay surprised and utterly baffled by their tall forms, a porcupine hunched into a spiny ball and pretending a ferociousness that deceived not even such hairbrained folk as the chipmunks in the tree roots, or those queens of stupidity, the fool hens on the branch. In the way of more serious things sometimes they paused to gaze down on some particularly beautiful glen—watered, perhaps, by a gleaming stream—or a long, dark valley steeped deeply in the ancient mysticism of the trackless wilds.

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He helped her over the steeps, waited for her at bad crossings; and meanwhile his thoughts found easy expression in words. He had to stop and remind himself that she was his foe. Beatrice herself attempted no such remembrance; she was simply carrying out her resolve to make the best of a deplorable situation.

She could see, however, that he kept close watch of her. He intended to give her no opportunity to strike back at him. He carried his rifle unloaded, so that if she were able, in an unguarded moment, to wrest it from him she could not turn it against him. But there was no joy for her in noticing these small precautions. They only reminded her of her imprisonment; and she wisely resolved to ignore them.

They climbed to the ridge top, following it on to the plateau where patches of snow still gleamed white and the spruce grew in dark clumps, leaving open, lovely parks between. Here they encountered their first caribou.

This animal, however, was not to their liking in the way of meat for the table. A turn in the trail suddenly revealed him at the edge of the glade, his white mane gleaming and his graceful form aquiver with that unquenchable vitality that seems to be the particular property of northern wild animals; but Ben let him go his way. He was an old bull, the monarch of his herd; he had ranged and mated and fought his rivals for nearly a score of years in the wild heart of Back There,—and his flesh would be mostly sinew.

Ten minutes later, however, the girl touched his arm. She pointed to a far glade, fully three hundred yards across the canyon. Her quick eyes made out a tawny form against the thicket.

It was a young caribou—a yearling buck—and his flesh would be tender as a spring fowl.

“It’s just what we want, but there’s not much chance of getting him at that range,” he said.

“Try, anyway. You’ve got a long-range rifle. If you can hold true, he’s yours.”

This was one thing that Ben was skilled at,—holding true. He raised the weapon to his shoulder, drawing down finely on that little speck of brown across the gulch. Few times in his life had he been more anxious to make a successful shot. Yet he would never have admitted the true explanation: that he simply desired to make good in the girl’s eyes.

He held his breath and pressed the trigger back.

Beatrice could not restrain a low, happy cry of triumph. She had forgotten all things, for the moment, but her joy at his success. And truly, Ben had made a remarkable shot. Most hunters who boast of long-range hits do not step off the distance shot; fifty yards is

called a hundred, a hundred and fifty yards three hundred; and to kill true at this range is not the accustomed thing on the trails of sport. The bullet had gone true as a light-shaft, striking the animal through the shoulders, and he had never stirred out of his tracks. With that joy of conquest known to all owners of rod and gun—related darkly to the blood-lust of the beasts—they raced across the gully toward the fallen.

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Ben quartered the animal, and again he saw fit to save the hide. It is the best material of all for the parka, the long, full winter garment of the North.

Ben carried the meat in four trips back to the camp. By the time this work was done, and one of the quarters was drying over a fire of quivering aspen chips, the day was done. Again they saw the twilight shadows grow, and the first sable cloak of night was drawn over the shoulders of the forest. Beatrice prepared a wonderful roast of caribou for their evening meal; and thereafter they sat a short time at the mouth of the cavern, looking quietly into the red coals of the dying fire. Again Ben knew the beneficence and peace of the sheltering walls of home. Again he felt a sweet security,—a taming, gentling influence through the innermost fiber of his being.

But Fenris the wolf gazed only into the darkened woods, and the hair stood stiff at his shoulders, and his eyes glowed and shone with the ancient hunting madness induced by the rising moon.

XXX

June passed away in the wilds of Back There, leaving warmer, longer days, a more potent sun, and a greener, fresher loveliness to the land. The spring calves no longer tottered on wobbly legs, but could follow their swift mothers over the most steep and difficult trails. Fledglings learned to fly, the wolf cubs had their first lessons in hunting on the ridges. The wild Yuga had fallen to such an extent that navigation—down to the Indian villages on the lower waters—was wholly impossible.

The days passed quickly for Ben and Beatrice. They found plenty of work and even of play to pass the time. Partly to fill her lonely moments, but more because it was an instinct with her, Beatrice took an ever-increasing interest in her cave home. She kept it clean and cooked the meals, performing her tasks with goodwill, even at times a gaiety that was as incomprehensible to herself as to Ben.

Their diet was not so simple now. Of course their flour and sugar and rice, and the meat that they took in the chase furnished the body of their meals, and without these things they could not live; but Beatrice was a woods child, and she knew how to find manna in the wilderness. Almost every morning she ventured out into the still, dew-wet forest, and nearly always she came in with some dainty for their table. She gathered watercress in the still pools and she knew a dozen ways to serve it. Sometimes she made a dressing out of animal oil, beaten to a cream; and it was better than lettuce salad. Other tender plant tops were used as a garnish and as greens, and many and varied were the edible roots that supplied their increasing desire for fresh vegetables.

Sometimes she found wocus in the marsh—the plant formerly in such demand by the Indians—and by patient experiment she learned how to prepare it for the table.

Washing the plant carefully she would pound it into paste that could be used as the base for a nutty and delicious bread. Other roots were baked in ashes or served fried in animal fat, and once or twice she found patches of wild strawberries, ripening on the slopes.

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This was living! They plucked the sweet, juicy berries from the vines; they served as dessert and were also used in the fashioning of delicious puddings with rice and sugar. Several times she found certain treasures laid by for winter use by the squirrels or the digging people—and perfectly preserved nuts and acorns, The latter, parched over coals, became one of the staples of their diet.

She gathered leaves of the red weed and dried them for tea. She searched out the nests of the grouse and robbed them of their eggs; and always high celebration in the cave followed such a find as this. Fried eggs, boiled eggs, poached eggs tickled their palates for mornings to come. And she traced down, one memorable day when their sugar was all but gone, a tree that the wild bees had stored with honey.

In the way of meat they had not only caribou, but the tender veal of moose and all manner of northern small game. Ben did not, however, spend rifle cartridges in reckless shooting. When at last his enemies came filing down through the beaver meadow he had no desire to be left with a half-empty gun. He had never fired this more powerful weapon since he had felled their first caribou. The moose calves and all the small game were taken with Beatrice's pistol.

Sometimes he took ptarmigan—those whistling, sprightly grouse of the high steeps—and Beatrice served uncounted numbers of them, like the famous blackbirds, baked in a pie. Fried ptarmigan was a dish never to forget; roast ptarmigan had a distinctive flavor all its own, and the memory of ptarmigan fricassee often called Ben home to the cavern an hour before the established mealtime. Indeed, they partook of all the northern species of that full-bosomed clan, the upland game birds; little, brown quail, willow grouse, fool hens, and the incomparable blue grouse, half of the breast of which was a meal. It was true that their little store of pistol cartridges was all but gone, but worlds of big game remained to fall back upon.

Ben never ceased regretting that he had not brought a single fishhook and a piece of line. He had long since carried the canoe from the river bank and hid it in the tall reeds of the lake shore, not only for pleasure's sake, but to preserve it for the autumn floods when they might want to float on down to the Indian villages; and surely it would have afforded the finest sport in the way of trolling for lake trout. But with utter callousness he made his pistol serve as a hook and line. Often he would crawl down, cautiously as a stalking wolf, to the edge of a trout pool, then fire mercilessly at a great, spotted beauty below. The bullet itself did not penetrate the water, but the shock carried through and the fish usually turned a white belly to the surface. A fat brook or lake trout, dipped in flour and fried to a chestnut brown, was a delight that never grew old.

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At every fresh find Beatrice would come triumphant into Ben's presence; and at such times they scarcely conducted themselves like enemies. An unguessed boyishness and charm had come to Ben in these ripe, full summer days: the hard lines softened in his face and mostly the hard shine left his eyes. Beatrice found herself curiously eager to please him, taking the utmost care and pains with every dish she prepared for the table; and it was true that he made the most joyful, exultant response to her efforts. The searing heat back of his eyes was quite gone, now. Even the scarlet fluid of his veins seemed to flow more quietly, with less fire, with less madness. A gentling influence had come to bear upon him; a great kindness, a new forbearance had brightened his outlook toward all the world. A great redemption was even now hovering close to him,—some unspeakable and ultimate blessing that he could not name.

Their days were not without pleasure. Often they ventured far into the heavy forest, and always fresh delight and thrilling adventure awaited them. Ever they learned more of the wild things that were their only neighbors,—creatures all the way down the scale from the lordly moose, proud of his growing antlers and monarch of the marshes, to the small pika, squeaking on the slide-rock of the high peaks. They knew and loved them all; they found ever-increasing enjoyment in the study of their shy ways and furtive occupations; they observed with delight the droll awkwardness of the moose calves, the impertinence and saucy speech of the jays, the humor of the black bear and the surly arrogance of the grizzly. They knew that superlative cunning of his wickedness, the wolverine; the stealth of the red fox; the ferociousness of the ermine whose brown skin, soon to be white, suggested only something silken and soft and tender instead of a fiendish cutthroat, terror of the Little People; the skulking cowardice of the coyote; and the incredible savagery and agility of the fisher,—that middle-sized hunter that catches and kills everything he can master except fish. They climbed high hills and descended into still, mysterious valleys; they paddled long, dreamy twilight hours on the lake; they traversed marshes where the moose wallowed; and they walked through ancient forests where the decayed vegetation was a mossy pulp under their feet. Sometimes they forgot the poignancy of their strange lives, romping sometimes, gossiping like jays in the tree-limbs, and sometimes, forgetting enmity, they told each other their secret beliefs and philosophies. They had picnics in the woods; and long, comfortable evenings before their dancing fire. But there was one enduring joy that always surpassed all the rest, a happiness that seemed to have its origin in the silent places of their hearts. It was just the return, after a fatiguing day in forest and marsh, to the sheltering walls of the cave.

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With his axe and hunting knife Ben prepared a complete set of furniture for their little abode. His first Work was a surpassing-marvelous dining-room suite of a table and two chairs. Then he put up shelves for their rapidly dwindling supplies of provisions and cut chunks of spruce log, with a bit of bark remaining, for fireside seats. And for more than a week, Beatrice was forbidden to enter a certain covert just beyond the glade lest she should prematurely discover an even greater wonder that Ben, in off hours, was preparing for a surprise.

From time to time she heard him busily at work, the ring of his axe and his gay whistling as he whittled bolts of wood; but other than that it concerned the grizzly skin she had not the least idea of his task. But the work was completed at last, and then came two days of rather significant silence,—quite incomprehensible to the girl. She was at a loss why Ben did not reveal his treasure.

But one morning she missed the familiar sounds of his fire-building, usually his first work on wakening. The very fact of their absence startled her wide-awake, while otherwise she would have perhaps slept late into the morning. Ben had seemingly vanished into the heavy timber across the glade.

Presently she heard him muttering and grunting as he moved some heavy object to the door of the cave. Boyishly, he could not wait for the usual late hour when she wakened. He made a wholly unnecessary amount of noise as he built the fire. Then he thrust his lean head into the cavern opening.

"I hope I haven't waked you up?" he said.

The girl smiled secretly. "I wanted to wake up, anyway—to-day."

"I wish you'd get up and come and look at something ugly I've got just outside the door."

She hurried into her outer garments, and in a moment appeared. It was ugly, certainly, the object that he had fashioned with such tireless toil: not fitted at all for a stylish city home; yet the girl, for one short instant, stopped breathing. It was a hammock, suspended on a stout frame, to take the place of her tree-bough bed on the cave floor. He had used the grizzly skin, hanging it with unbreakable sinew, and fashioning it in such a manner that folds of the hide could be turned over her on cold nights. For a moment she gazed, very earnestly, into the rugged, homely, raw-boned face of her companion.

Beatrice was deeply and inexplicably sobered, yet a curious happiness took swift possession of her heart. Reading the gratitude in her eyes, Ben's lips broke into a radiant smile.

"I guess you've forgotten what day it is," he said.

“Of course. I hardly know the month.”

“I’ve notched each day, you know. And maybe you’ve forgotten—on the ride out from Snowy Gulch—we talked of birthdays. To-day is yours.”

She stared at him in genuine astonishment. She had not dreamed that this little confidence, given in a careless moment of long weeks before, had lingered in the man’s memory. She had supposed that the fury and savagery of his war with her father and the latter’s followers had effaced all such things as this.

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And it was true that had this birthday come a few weeks before, on the river journey and previous to their occupation of the cave, Ben would have let it pass unnoticed. The smoldering fire in his brain would have seared to ashes any such kindly thought as this. But when the wild hunter leaves his leafy lair and goes to dwell, a man rather than a beast, in a permanent abode, he has thought for other subjects than his tribal wars and the blood-lust of his hates. The hearth, and the care and friendship of the girl had tamed Ben to this degree, at least.

But wonders were not done. The look in the girl's eyes suddenly melted, as the warm sun melts ice, some of the frozen bitterness of his spirit. "It's your birthday—and I hope you have many of 'em," he went on. "No more like this—but all of 'em happy,—as you deserve."

He walked toward her, and her eyes could not leave his. He bent soberly, and brushed her lips with his own.

There were always worlds to talk about in the warm gleam of their fire. When the day's work was done, and the hush of early night gathered the land to its arms, they would sit on their fireside seats and settle all problems, now and hereafter, to the perfect satisfaction of them both.

From Ben, Beatrice gained a certain strength of outlook as well as depth of insight, but she gave him in return more than she received. He felt that her influence, in his early years, would have worked wonders for him. She straightened out his moral problems for him, taught him lessons in simple faith; and her own childish sweetness and absolute purity showed his whole world in a new light.

Sometimes they talked of religion and ethics, sometimes of science and economics, and particularly they talked of what was nearest to them,—the mysteries and works of nature. She had been a close observer of the forest. She had received some glimpse of its secret laws that were, when all was said and done, the basic laws of life. But for all her love of science she was not a mere biologist. She had a full and devout faith in Law and Judgment beyond any earthly sphere.

"No one can live in this boundless wilderness and not believe," she told him earnestly, her dark eyes brimming with her fervor. "Perhaps I can't tell you why—maybe it's just a feeling of need, of insufficiency of self. Besides, God is close, like He was to the Israelites when they were in the wilderness; but you will remember that He never came close again.—This forest is so big and so awful, He knows he must stay close to keep you from dying of fear.—God may not be a reality to the people of the cities, where they see only buildings and streets, but Ben, He is to me. You can't forget Him up here. He stands on every mountain, just as the sons of Aaron saw Him."

He found, to his surprise, that she was not ill-read, particularly in the old-time classics. But her environment had also influenced her choice of reading. She loved the old legends in the minor,—far-off and plaintive things that reflected the mood of the dusky forest in which she lived.

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One night, when the moon was in the sky, he told her of his war record, of the shell-shock and the strange, criminal mania that followed it; and then of his swift recovery. With an over-powering need of self-justification he told her of his further adventures with Ezram, of the old man's murder and the theft of the claim. She heard him out, listening attentively; but in loyalty to her father she did not let herself believe him entirely. The answer she gave him was the same as she had always given at his every reference to his side of the case.

"If you were in the right, you'd take me back and let the law take its course," she told him. "You'd not be out here laying an ambush for them, to kill them when they try to rescue me."

He could never make her understand how, by the intricacies of law, it would be a rare chance that he would be able to fasten the crime on the murderers: that he had taken the only sure way open to make them pay for Ezram's death. He told her of the old man's, final request; how that his war with her father and his men was a debt that, by secret, inscrutable laws of his being, could never be written off or disavowed. But he could never fully find words to uphold his position. The thing went back to his instincts, traced at last to the remorseless spirit of the wolf that was his heritage.

Yet these hours of talk were immensely good for him. While they never met on common grounds, the girl's true outlook and nobility of character were ever more manifest to him; and were not without a gentling, healing influence upon him. He could not blind himself to them. And sometimes when he sat alone by his dying fire, as the dark menaced him, and the girl that was his charge slept within the portals of stone, he had the unescapable feeling that the very structure of his life was falling and shattering down; but even now he could see, an enchanted vista in the distance, a mightier, more glorious tower, builded and shaped by this woman's hand.

XXXI

While Beatrice was at her household tasks—cooking the meals, cleaning the cave, washing and repairing their clothes—Ben never forgot his more serious work. Certain hours every day he spent in exploration, seeking out the passes over the hills, examining every possible means of entrance and egress into his valley, getting the lay of the land and picking out the points from which he would make his attack. Already he knew every winding game trail and every detail of the landscape for five miles or more around. His ultimate vengeance seemed just as sure as the night following the day.

Ever he listened for the first sound of the pack train in the forest; and even in his hours of pleasure his eyes ever roamed over the sweep of valley and marsh below. He was prepared for his enemies now. One or five, they couldn't escape him. He had provided for every contingency and had seemingly perfected his plan to the last detail.

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He had not the slightest fear that his eagerness would cost him his aim when finally his eye looked along the sights at the forms of his enemies, helpless in the marsh. He was wholly cold about the matter now. The lust and turmoil in his veins, remembered like a ghastly dream from that first night, returned but feebly now, if at all. This change, this restraint had been increasingly manifest since his occupation of the cave, and it had marked, at the same time, a growing barrier between himself and Fenris. But he could not deny but that such a development was wholly to have been expected. Fenris was a child of the open forest aisles, never of the fireside and the hearth. It was not that the wolf had ceased to give him his dint of faithful service, or that he loved him any the less. But each of them had other interests,—one his home and hearth; the other the ever-haunting, enticing call of the wildwood. Lately Fenris had taken to wandering into the forest at night, going and coming like a ghost; and once his throat and jowls had been stained with dark blood.

“It’s getting too tame for you here, old boy, isn’t it?” Ben said to him one hushed, breathless night. “But wait just a little while more. It won’t be tame then.”

It was true: the hunting party, if they had started at once, must be nearing their death valley by now. Except for the absolute worst of traveling conditions they would have already come. Ben felt a growing impatience: a desire to do his work and get it over. His pulse no longer quickened and leaped at the thought of vengeance; and the wolflike pleasure in simple killing could no longer be his. It would merely be the soldier’s work—a dreadful obligation to perform speedily and to forget. Even the memory of the huddled form of his savior and friend, so silent and impotent in the dead leaves, did not stir him into madness now.

Yet he never thought of disavowing his vengeance. It was still the main purpose of his life. He had no theme but that: when that work was done he could conceive of nothing further of interest on earth, nothing else worth living for. Not for an instant had he relented: except for that one kiss, on the occasion of her birthday, he had never broken his promise in regard to his relations with Beatrice. His first trait was steadfastness, a trait that, curiously enough, is inherent in all living creatures who are by blood close to the wild wolf, from the German police dog to the savage husky of the North. But he was certainly and deeply changed in these weeks in the cave. He no longer hated these three murderous enemies of his. The power to hate had simply died in his body. He regarded their destruction rather as a duty he owed old Ezram, an obligation that he would die sooner than forego.

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The hushed, dark, primal forest had a different appeal for him now. He loved it still, with the reverence and adoration of the forester he was, but no longer with that love a servant bears his master. He had distinctly escaped from its dominance. The passion and mounting fire that it wakened at the fall of darkness could no longer take possession of him, as strong drink possesses the brain, bending his will, making of him simply a tool and a pawn to gratify its cruel desires and to achieve its mysterious ends. He had been, in spirit, a brother of the wolf, before: a runner in the packs. Such had been the outgrowth of innate traits; part of his strange destiny. Now, after these weeks in the cave, he was a man. It was hard for him to explain even to himself. It was as if in the escape from his own black passions, he had also escaped the curious tyranny of the wild; not further subject to its cruel moods and whims, but rather one of a Dominant Breed, a being who could lift his head in defiance to the storm, obey his own will, go his own way. This was no little change. Perhaps, when all is said and done, it marks the difference between man and the lesser mammals, the thing that has evolved a certain species of the primates—simply woods creatures that trembled at the storm and cowered in the night—into the rulers and monarchs of the earth.

Ben had come out from the darkened forest trails where he made his lairs and had gone into a cave to live! He had found a permanent abode—a lasting, shelter from the cold and the storm. It suggested a curious allegory to him. Some time in the long-forgotten past, probably when the later glaciers brought their promise of cold, all his race left their leafy bowers and found cave homes in the cliffs. Before that time they were merely woods children, blind puppets of nature, sleeping where exhaustion found them; wandering without aim in the tree aisles; mating when they met the female of their species on the trails and venturing on again; knowing the ghastly, haunting fear of the night and the blind terror of the storm and elements: merely higher beasts in a world of beasts. But they came to the caves. They established permanent abodes. They began to be men.

All that now stands as civilization, all the conquest of the earth and sea and air began from that moment. It was the Great Epoch,—and Ben had illustrated it in his own life. The change had been infinitely slow, but certain as the movement of the planets in their spheres. Behind the sheltering walls they got away from fear,—that cruel bondage in which Nature holds all her wild creatures, the burden that makes them her slaves. Never to shudder with horror when the darkness fell in silence and mystery; never to have the heart freeze with terror when the thunder roared in the sky and the wind raged in the trees. The cave dwellers began to come into their own. Sheltered behind stone walls they could defy the elements that had enslaved them so

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long. This freedom gained they learned to strike the fire; they took one woman to keep the cave, instead of mating indiscriminately in the forest, thus marking the beginning of family life. Love instead of deathless hatred, gentleness rather than cruelty, peace in the place of passion, mercy and tolerance and self-control: all these mighty bulwarks of man's dominance grew into strength behind the sheltering walls of home.

Thus in these few little weeks Ben Darby—a beast of the forest in his unbridled passions—had in some measure imaged the life history of the race. He had lived again the momentous regeneration. The protecting walls, the hearth, particularly Beatrice's wholesome and healing influence, had tamed him. He was still a forester, bred in the bone—loving these forest depths with an ardor too deep for words—but the mark of the beast was gone from his flesh.

He could still deal justice to Ezram's murderers and thus keep faith with his dead partner; but the primal passions could no longer dominate him. His pet, however, remained the wolf. The sheltering cavern walls were never for him. He loved Ben with an undying devotion, yet a barrier was rising between them. They could not go the same paths forever.

Matters reached a crisis between Fenris and himself one still, warm night in late July. The two were sitting side by side at the cavern maw, watching the slow enchantment of the forest under the spell of the rising moon; Beatrice had already gone to her hammock. As the last little blaze died in the fire, and it crackled at ever longer intervals, Ben suddenly made a moving discovery. The fringe of forest about him, usually so dreamlike and still, was simply breathing and throbbing with life.

Ben dropped his hand to the wolf's shoulders. "The little folks are calling on us to-night," he said quietly.

In all probability he spoke the truth. It was not an uncommon thing for the creatures of the wood—usually the lesser people such as rodents and the small hunters—to crowd close to the edge of the glade and try to puzzle out this ruddy mystery in its center. Unused to men they could never understand. Sometimes the lynx halted in his hunt to investigate, sometimes an old black bear—kindly, benevolent good-humored old bachelor that every naturalist loves—grunted and pondered at the edge of shadow, and sometimes even such lordly creatures as moose and caribou paused in their night journeys to see what was taking place.

Curiously, the wolf started violently at Ben's touch. The man suddenly regarded him with a gaze of deepest interest. The hair was erect on the powerful neck, the eyes swam in pale, blue fire, and he was staring away into the mysterious shadows.

“What do you see, old-timer?” Ben asked. “I wish I could see too.”

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He brought his senses to the finest focus, trying hard to understand. He was aware only of the strained silence at first. Then here and there, about the dimming circle of firelight, he heard the soft rustle of little feet, the subdued crack of a twig or the scratch of a dead leaf. The forest smells—of which there is no category in heaven or earth—reached him with incredible clarity. These were faint, vaguely exciting smells, some of them the exquisite fragrances of summer flowers, others beyond his ken. And presently two small, bright circles appeared in a distant covert, glowed once, and then went out.

By peering closely, with unwinking eyes, he began to see other twin-circles of green and yellow light. Yet they were furtive little radiances—vanishing swiftly—and they were nothing of which to be afraid.

“They *are* out to-night,” he murmured. “No wonder you’re excited, Fenris. What is it—some celebration in the forest?”

There was no possible explanation. Foresters know that on certain nights the wilderness seems simply to teem with life—scratchings and rustlings in every covert—and on other nights it is still and lifeless as a desert. The wild folk were abroad to-night and were simply paying casual, curious visits to Ben’s fire.

Once more Ben glanced at the wolf. The animal no longer crouched. Rather he was standing rigid, his head half-turned and lifted, gazing away toward a distant ridge behind the lake. A wilderness message had reached him, clear as a voice.

But presently Ben understood. Throbbing through the night he heard a weird, far-carrying call—a long-drawn note, broken by half-sobs—the mysterious, plaintive utterance of the wild itself. Yet it was not an inanimate voice. He recognized it at once as the howl of a wolf, one of Fenris’ wild brethren.

The creature at his feet started as if from a blow. Then he stood motionless, listening, and the cry came the second time. He took two leaps into the darkness.

Deeply moved, Ben watched him. The wolf halted, then stole back to his master’s side. He licked the man’s hand with his warm tongue, whining softly.

“What is it, boy?” Ben asked. “What do you want me to do?”

The wolf whined louder, his eyes luminous with ineffable appeal. Once more he leaped into the shadows, pausing as if to see if Ben would follow him.

The man shook his head, rather soberly. A curious, excited light was in his eyes. “I can’t go, old boy,” he said. “This is my place—here. Fenris, I can’t leave the cave.”

For a moment they looked eyes into eyes—in the glory of that moon as strange a picture as the wood gods ever beheld. Once more the wolf call sounded. Fenris whimpered softly.

“Go ahead if you like,” Ben told him. “God knows it’s your destiny.”

The wolf seemed to understand. With a glad bark he sped away and almost instantly vanished into the gloom.

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But Fenris had not broken all ties with the cave. The chain was too strong for that, the hold on his wild heart too firm. If there is one trait, far and near in the wilds, that distinguishes the woods children, it is their inability to forget. Fenris had joined his fellows, to be sure; but he still kept watch over the cave.

The strongest wolf in the little band, the nucleus about which the winter pack would form, he largely confined their hunting range to the district immediately about the cave. It held him like a chain of iron. Although the woods trails beguiled him with every strong appeal, the sight of his master was a beloved thing to him still, and scarcely a night went by but that he paused to sniff at the cavern maw, seeing that all was well. At such times his followers would linger, trembling and silent, in the farther shadows. Because they had never known the love of man they utterly failed to understand. But in an instant Fenris would come back to them, the wild urge in his heart seemingly appeased by the mere assurance of Ben's presence and safety.

Ben himself was never aware of these midnight visits. The feet of the wolves were like falling feathers on the grass; and if sometimes, through the cavern maw, he half-wakened to catch the gleam of their wild eyes, he attributed it merely to the presence of skulking coyotes, curious concerning the dying coals of the fire.

XXXII

Beatrice had kept only an approximate track of the days; yet she knew that an attempt to rescue her must be almost at hand. Even traveling but half a dozen miles a day, and counting out a reasonable time for exploration and delays, her father's party must be close upon them. And the thought of the forthcoming battle between her abductor and her rescuers filled every waking moment with dread.

She could not escape the thought of it. It lingered, hovering like a shadow, over all her gayest moments; it haunted her more sober hours, and it brought evil dreams at night. Her one hope was that her father had given her up for lost and had not attempted her rescue.

She realized perfectly the perfection of Ben's plans. She knew that he had provided for every contingency; and besides, he had every natural advantage in his favor. The end was inevitable: his victory and the destruction of his foes. There would be little mercy for these three in the hands of this iron man from the eastern provinces. If they were to be saved it must be soon, not a week from now, nor when another moon had waned. If Ben was to be checkmated there were not many hours to waste.

She had had no opportunity to escape, at first. Ben knew that she could not make her way over the hundreds of miles of howling wilderness without food supplies, and always the wolf had been on guard. He was like a were-wolf, a demon, anticipating her every

move, knowing her secret thoughts. But the wolf had gone now to join his fellows. She was not aware of his almost nightly return. Perhaps the fact of his absence gave her an opportunity, her one chance to save her father from Ben's ambush.

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Conditions for escape were more favorable than at any time since their departure from the canoe landing, that late spring day of long ago. The wolf was gone; Ben's guard of her was ever more lax. The season was verdant: she could supplement what supplies she took from the cave with roots and berries, and the warm nights would enable her to carry a minimum of blankets. She knew that she could never hope to succeed in the venture except by traveling light and fast. On the other hand she would need all of Ben's remaining supplies to bring her through: in a few more days the stores would be so low that she could not attempt the trip. Human beings cannot survive, in the forests of the north, on roots and berries alone. Tissue-building flour and sustaining meat are necessary to climb the ridges and battle the thicket.

How could she obtain these things? For all his seeming carelessness Ben kept a fairly close watch on her actions, and he would discover her flight within a few hours. Stronger than she, and knowing every trail and pass for miles around he could overtake her with ease. He gave her no opportunity to seize his rifle, load it and turn it against him, thus making her escape by force.

The fact that she would leave him without food mattered not one way or another. He would still have his rifle, and his small stock of rifle cartridges would procure sufficient big game to sustain him for weeks and months to come. After all, the whole issue depended on the rifle,—the symbol of force. It would be his instrument of vengeance when his chance came. If she could only take this weapon from him she need not fear the coming of her rescuers. In that case Ben would be helpless against them.

Unfortunately, the gun rarely left his hands. If indeed she should attempt to seize it he would wrest it away from her before she could destroy or injure it. But it was a hopeful fact that the rifle was useless without its shells!

To procure these, however, presented an unsolvable problem. Any way she turned she found a barrier Ben kept them in his shell belt, and he wore the belt about his waist, waking or sleeping. Only to procure it, run like a deer and hurl it into the rapids of the Yuga,—and her problem would be absolutely solved. Ben would be obliged to leave the cave home at once and return with her to the Yuga cabins, utilizing the few stores they had left for the journey—simply because to stay, unarmed, would mean to die of starvation. Indeed the few remaining supplies would not more than last them through now, traveling early and late, so if the venture were to be attempted at all it must be at once. On the other hand his rifle and shells would enable the two of them to remain in the cavern indefinitely on a diet of meat alone.

As she worked about the cavern she brooded over the plan; but at first she could conceive of no possible way to procure the shells. If the chance came, however, she wanted to be ready. She planned all other details of the venture; the shortest route to the nearest rapids of the river where she might dispose of the deadly cylinders of brass.

It became necessary, also, to consider the lesser weapon for the plain reason that it might defeat her in the moment of her success.

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Ben kept the weapon in his cartridge belt, but the extra pistol shells were among the supplies. They could easily be procured. It would also be necessary to induce him to fire away the few shells that he carried in the pistol magazine; but this would likely be easy enough to do. He put little reliance on the weapon, trusting rather to his rifle both for the impending war and the procurance of big game; and he would not harbor the pistol shells as long as he had his rifle.

But the days were passing! Any attempt at deliverance must be made before the food stores were further depleted. They could not make the march without food. Days and nights overtook her with her triumph as far distant as ever. The moment of opportunity she had watched for, in which she might seize the cartridge belt and destroy it, had never come to pass. The plans she had made while the night lay soft and mysterious in the solitudes had all come to nothing. He had never, as she had hoped, removed his belt and forgotten to replace it, nor had his slumber ever been so deep that she could steal it from him.

His own triumph surely was almost at hand. Surely his pursuers had almost overtaken him. The stores had already fallen far below the margin of safety for the long journey home. The thought was with her, and she was desperate one long, warm afternoon as she searched for roots and berries in the forest. Edible plants were ever more hard to find, these past days; but what there were she gathered almost automatically, herself lost in a deep preoccupation. And all at once her hand reached toward a little vine of black berries, each with a green tuft at the end, not unlike gooseberries in southern gardens.

As if by instinct, hardly aware of the motion, she withdrew her hand. She knew this vine. She was enough of a forester never to mistake it. It was the deadly nightshade, and a handful of the berries spelt death. She started to look elsewhere.

But presently she paused, arrested by an idea so engrossing and yet so terrible that her heart seemed to pause in her breast. Had any rules been laid down for her to follow in her war with Ben? Was she to consider methods at such a time as this? Was she not a woods girl,—a woman, not a child, trained and tutored in the savage code of the wild that knows no ethics other than might, whether might of arm or craft, of brain or fell singleness of purpose? Should she consider ethics now?

Her father's life was in imminent danger. Another day might find him stretched lifeless before her. Ben had not hesitated to use every weapon in his power; she should not hesitate now. Ben had made his war; she would wage it by his own code.

For a moment she stood almost without outward motion, intrigued by the possibilities of this little handful of berries. She shuddered once, nervously, but there was no further impulse of remorse. Perhaps she trembled slightly; and her eyes were simply depthless shadows under her brows.

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They were so little, seemingly so inoffensive: these dark berries in the shadows of the covert. They were scarcely to be noticed twice. But not even the savage grizzly was of such might; storms or seas were not so deadly. There they were, inconspicuous among their sister plants, waiting for her hand.

It was right that they should be black in color. Their blackness was as of a black night without a star shining through,—a black cloud with never a rainbow to promise hope. She could not turn her eyes away! How black they were among the green leaves—lightless as death itself.

A handful of them meant death: her father had warned her about them long ago. But half a handful—perhaps a dozen of the sable berries in the palm of her hand—what did *they* mean? Just a sickness wherein one could no longer guard a prisoner. They were a powerful alkaloid, she knew; and a dozen of them would likely mean hours and hours of deep, dreamless sleep,—a sleep in which one could take no reckoning of hands fumbling at a cartridge belt! Half a handful would, in all probability, fail to strike the life from such a powerful frame as Ben's, but would certainly act upon him like a powerful opiate and leave him helpless in her hands.

Eagerly her fingers plucked the black berries.

XXXIII

In one of the tin cups Beatrice pressed the juice from the nightshade, obtaining perhaps a tablespoonful of black liquor. To this she added considerable sugar, barely tasting the mixture on the end of her finger. The balance was inclining toward the success of her plan. The sugar mostly killed the pungent taste of the berries.

Then she concealed the cup in a cluster of vines, ready for the moment of need. Her next act was to procure from among the supplies the little cardboard box containing half a dozen or so of her pistol shells. The way of safety was to destroy these first. The effect of the poison might be of only a few minutes' duration, and every motion might count. Under any conditions, they would be out of the way. She was careful, with a superlative cunning, to take the box as well as its contents. She foresaw that in all likelihood Ben would seek the shells as soon as he fired the few that remained in his pistol magazine; and an empty container might put him upon his guard. On the other hand, if he could not find the box at all, he could easily be led to believe that it had been simply misplaced among the other supplies.

She scattered the shells in the heavy brush where not even the bright, searching eyes of the Canada jay might ever find them. Then she hastened up the ridge to meet Ben on his way to the cave.

She waited a few minutes, then spying his stalwart form at the edge of the beaver meadow, she tripped down to meet him. He was not in the least suspicious of this little act of friendship. It was quite the customary thing, lately, for her thus to watch for his coming; and his brown face always lighted with pleasure at the first glimpse of her graceful form framed by the spruce. She too had always taken pleasure in these little meetings and in the gay talk they had as they sped down toward the cavern; but her delight was singularly absent to-day. She tried to restrain the wild racing of her heart.

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She knew she must act her part. Her plan was to put him off his guard, to hide her treachery with pretended friendship. To meet him here—far distant from the poison cup hidden in the vines—would give her time to master her leaping heart and to strengthen her self-control.

Yet she had hardly expected him to greet her in just this way,—with such a light in his eyes and such obvious delight in his smile. He had a rather boyish, friendly smile, this foe of hers whom she was about to despatch into the very shadow of death. She dispelled quickly a small, faltering voice of remorse. This was no time for remorse, for gentleness and mercy. She hurried to his side.

“You’re flushed from hurrying down that hill,” he told her gayly. “Beatrice, you’re getting prettier every day.”

“It’s the simple life that’s doing it, Ben! No late hours, no indigestible food—”

“Speaking of food—I’m famished. I hope you’ve got something nice for lunch—and I know you have.”

She *had* been careful with to-day’s lunch; but it had merely been part of her plot to put him off his guard. “Caribou tenderloin—almost the last of him—wocus bread and strawberries,” she assured him. “Does that suit your highness?”

He made a great feint of being overwhelmed by the news. “Then let’s hurry. Take my arm and we’ll fly.”

She seized the strong forearm, thrilled in spite of herself by the muscles of steel she felt through the sleeves. He fell into his fastest walking stride,—long steps that sped the yards under them. They emerged from the marsh and started to climb the ridge.

At a small hollow beside the creek bed her fingers suddenly tightened on his arm. A thrill that was more of wonder than of joy coursed through her; and her dark eyes began to glitter with excitement. The wilderness was her ally to-day. She suddenly saw her chance—in a manner that could not possibly waken his suspicions of her intentions—of disposing of the remainder of his pistol cartridges.

On a log thirty feet distant sat an old grouse with half a dozen of her brood, all of them perched in a row and relying on their protective coloring to save them from sight. They were Franklin’s grouse—and they had appeared as if in answer to Beatrice’s secret wish.

These birds were common enough in their valley, and not a day passed without seeing from five to fifty of them, yet the sight went straight home to Beatrice’s superstitions. “Get them with your pistol,” she whispered. “I want them all—for a big grouse pie to-night.”

“But our pistol shells are getting low,” Ben objected. “I’ve hardly got enough shells in the gun to get ‘em all—”

“No matter. You have to use them some time. There’s a few more in the cave, I think. We’ll have to rely on big game from now on, anyway. Don’t miss one.”

Ben drew his pistol, then walked up within twenty feet. He drew slowly down, knocking the old bird from her perch with a bullet through the neck.

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“Good work,” Beatrice exulted. “Now for the chicks.”

Ben took the bird on the extreme right, and again the bullet sped true. The remainder of the flock had become uneasy now; and at the next shot all except one flew into the branches of the surrounding trees. This shot was equally successful, and with the fourth he knocked the remaining bird from the log.

Each of the four birds he had downed with a shot either through the head or the neck; and such shooting would have been marvelous indeed in the eyes of the tenderfoot. But both these two foresters knew that there was nothing exceptional about it. Pistol shooting is simply a matter of a sure eye and steady nerves, combined with a greater or less period of practice. Few were the trappers or woodsmen north of fifty-three that could not have done as much.

Ben turned his attention to the fowl on the lower tree limbs, hitting once but missing the second time. To correct this unpardonable proceeding, he knocked with his seventh a fat cock, his spurs just starting, from almost the top of a young spruce.

“Here’s one more,” Beatrice urged him. “I’ll need every one for the pie.”

But the gun was empty. The firing pin snapped harmlessly against the breach. They gathered the grouse and sped on down to the cavern.

Her heart seemingly leaped into her throat at every beat; but with steady hands and smiling face she went about the preparation of the meal. She fried the venison and baked the wocus bread, and with more than usual spirit and gaiety set the dishes at Ben’s place at the table. “Draw up your chair,” she told him. “I’ll have the tea in a minute.”

Ben peered with sudden interest into her face. “What’s troubling you, Bee?” he asked gently. “You’re pale as a ghost.”

“I’m not feeling overly well.” Her eyes dropped before his gaze. “I’m not hungry—at all. But it’s nothing to worry about—”

She saw by his eyes that he was worrying; yet it was evident that he had not the slightest suspicion of the real cause of the sudden pallor in her cheeks. She saw his face cloud and his eyes darken; and again she heard that faint, small voice of remorse—whispering deep in her heart’s heart. He was always so considerate of her, this jailer of hers. His concern was always so real and deep. Yet in a moment more the kindly sympathy would be gone from his face. He would be lying very still—and his face would be even more pale than hers.



Listlessly she walked to the door of the cave, procuring a handful of dried red-root leaves that she used for tea. Through the cavern opening he saw her drop them into the bucket that served as their teapot.

Then she came back for the oiled, cloth bag that contained the last of their sugar. This was always one of her little kindnesses,—to sweeten his tea for him before she brought it to him. He began to eat his steak.

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In one glance the girl saw that he was wholly unsuspecting. He trusted her; in their weeks together he had lost all fear of treachery from her. There he was, exulting over the frugal lunch she had prepared, with no inkling of the deadly peril that even now was upon him. She wished he did not trust her so completely; it would be easier for her if he was just a little wary, a little more on guard.

She felt cold all over. She could hardly keep from shivering. But this was the moment of trial; the thing would be done in a moment more. She mustn't give way yet to the growing weakness in her muscles. She walked to the vine where she had left the potion.

How much of it there was—it seemed to have doubled in quantity since she had left it. A handful of the black berries meant death—certain as the sunrise—but what did half a handful mean? The question came to her again. How did she know that half a handful did not mean death too,—not just hours of slumber, but relentless and irremediable death! Would that be the end of her day's work—to see this tall, friendly warden of hers lying dead before her gaze, the laughter gone from his lips and the light faded from his eyes? She would be free then to strip the shell belt from his waist. He would never waken to prevent her. She could escape too—back to her father's home—and leave him in the cave.

All that he had told her concerning his war with her father recurred to her in one vivid flash. Could it have been that he had told the truth—that her father and his followers had been the attackers in the beginning? She had never believed him fully; but could it be that he was in the right? His claim had been invaded, he said, and his one friend murdered in cold blood. Was this not cause enough, by the code of the North, for a war of reprisal?

But even as these thoughts came to her, she had walked boldly to the fire and emptied the contents of the cup into the boiling water in the teapot. Ben would have only had to look up to see her do it. Yet still he did not suspect.

She waited an instant, steadying herself for the ordeal to come. Then she took the pot off the fire and poured the hot contents into the cup that had just held the potion. She had been careful not to put enough water into the pot to weaken the drink. The cup brimmed; but none was left. She brought it steaming to Ben's side.

No kindly root tripped her feet as she entered, no merciful unsteadiness caused her to drop this cup of death and spill its contents.

"Thanks, Beatrice." Ben looked up, smiling. "I'm a brute to let you fix my tea when you are feeling so bad. But I sure am grateful, if that helps any—"

His voice sounded far away, like a voice in a nightmare. “It’s pretty strong, I’m afraid,” she told him. “The leaves weren’t very good, and I boiled them too long. I’m afraid you’ll find it bitter.”

“I’ll drink it, if it’s bitter as gall,” he assured her, “after your kindness to fix it.”

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His hand reached and seized the handle of the cup. Even now—*now*—he was raising it to his lips. In an instant more he would be pouring it down his throat, too considerate of her to admit its unwholesome taste, drinking it down though it tasted the potion of death that it was! The hair seemed to start on her head.

Then she seemed to writhe as in a convulsion. Her voice rose in a piercing scream. “Ben—*Ben*—*don’t drink it!*” she cried. “God have mercy on my soul!”

But with that utterance a strength surpassing that of sinew and muscle returned to her. She reached and knocked the cup from his hand; and its black contents, like dark blood, stained the sandy floor of the cavern.

Ben’s first thought was curiously not of his own narrow escape, but was rather in concern for Beatrice. Whether or not he had actually swallowed any of the liquor in the cup he did not know; nor did he give the matter a thought. He was aware of only the terror-stricken girl before him, her face deathly white and her eyes starting and wide. He leaped to his feet.

Fearing that she was about to faint he steadied her with his hand. The echo of her scream died in the cavern, the cup rolled on the floor and came to a standstill against the wall; but still she made no sound, only gazing as if entranced. But slowly, as he steadied her, the blessed tears stole into her eyes and rolled down her white cheeks; and once more breath surged into her lungs.

“Never mind, Beatrice,” the man was saying, his deep, rough voice gentle as a woman’s. “Don’t cry—please don’t cry—just forget all about it. Let’s go over to your hammock and rest awhile.”

With a strong arm he guided her to her cot, and smiling kindly, pushed her down into it. “Just take it easy,” he advised. “And forget all about it. You’ll be all right in a minute.”

“But you don’t understand—you don’t know—what I tried to do—”

“No matter. Tell me after a while, if you want to. Don’t tell me at all if you’d rather not. I’m going back to my lunch.” He laughed, trying to bring her to herself. “I wouldn’t miss that caribou steak for anything—even though I can’t have my tea. Just lay down a while, and rest.”

His rugged face lighted as he smiled, kindly and tolerantly, and then he turned to go. But her solemn voice arrested him.

“Wait, Ben. I want you to know—now—so you won’t trust me again—or give me another chance. The cup—was poisoned.”

But the friendly light did not yet wane in his eyes. “I didn’t think it was anything very good—the way you knocked it out of my hand. We’ll just pretend it was very bad tea—and let it go at that.”

“No. It was nightshade—it might have killed you.” She spoke in a flat, lifeless voice. “I didn’t want it to kill you—I just wanted to give you enough to put you to sleep—so I could take your rifle shells and throw them away—but I was willing to let you drink it, even if it *did* kill you.”

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The man looked at her, in infinite compassion, then came and sat beside her in the hammock. Rather quietly he took one of her hands and gazed at it, without seeing it, a long time. Then he pressed it to his lips.

For a breath he held it close to his cheek, his eyes lightless and far away, and she gazed at him in amazement.

"You'd kiss my hand—after what I did—?"

"After what you *didn't* do," he corrected. "Please, Beatrice—don't blame yourself. Some way—I understand things better—than I used to. Even if you had killed me—I don't see why it wouldn't have been your right. I've held you here by force. Yet you didn't let me drink the stuff. You knocked it out of my hand."

And now, for the first time, an inordinate amazement came into his face. He looked at her intently, yet with no unfriendliness, no passion. Rather it was with overwhelming wonder.

"*You knocked it out of my hands!*" he repeated, more loudly. "Oh, Beatrice—it's my turn to beg forgiveness now! When I was at your mercy, and the cup at my lips—you spared me. Why did you do it, Beatrice?"

He gazed at her with growing ardor. She shook her head. She simply did not know the reason.

"It's not your place to feel penitent," he told her, with infinite sincerity. "If you had let me take it, you'd have just served me right—you'd have just paid me back in my own coin. It was fair enough—to use every advantage you had. Good Lord, have you forgotten that I am holding you here by force? But instead—you saved me, when you might have killed me—and won the fight. All you've done is to show yourself the finer clay—that's what you've done. God knows I suppose the woman is always finer clay than the man—yet it comes with a jolt, just the same. It's not for you to be down-hearted—Heaven knows the strength you've shown is above any I ever had, or ever will have. You've shown how to feel mercy—I could never show anything but hate, and revenge. You've shown me a bigger and stronger code than mine. And there's nothing—nothing I can say."

The tone changed once more to the personal and solicitous. "But it's been a big strain on you—I can see that. I believe I'd lie here and rest awhile if I were you. I'll eat my dinner—and the fire's about out too. That's the girl—Beatrice."

Gently he picked her up, seemingly with no physical effort and laid her in her hammock. "Then—you'll forgive me?" she asked brokenly.



“Good Heavens, I wish there was something to forgive—so we’d be a little more even. But you’ve accomplished something, Beatrice—and I don’t know what it is yet—I only know you’ve changed me—and softened me—as I never dreamed any one in the world could. Now go to sleep.”

He turned from her, but the food on the table no longer tempted him. For a full hour he stood before the ashes of the fire, deeply and inextricably bewildered with himself, with life, and with all these thoughts and hopes and regrets that thronged him. He was like ashes now himself; the fires of his life seemed burned out. The thought recalled him to the need of cutting fuel for the night’s fire.

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He might be able to quiet the growing turmoil in his brain when the still shadows of the spruce closed around him. He seized his axe, then peered into the cave. Beatrice, worn out by the stress of the hour before and immensely comforted by Ben's words, was already deeply asleep. His rifle leaned against the wall of the cavern, and he put it in the hollow of his arm. It was not that he feared Beatrice would attempt to procure it. The act was mostly habit, combined with the fact that their supply of meat was all but exhausted and he did not wish to miss any opportunity for big game.

The forest was particularly gloomy to-day. Its shadows lay deep. And this was not merely the result of his own darkened outlook: glancing up, he saw that clouds were gathering in the sky. They would need fuel in plenty to keep the fire bright to-night. Evidently rain was impending,—one of those cold, steady downpours that are disliked so cordially by the folk of the upper Selkirks.

He went a full two hundred yards before he found a tree to his liking. It was a tough spruce of medium height and just at the edge of the stream. He laid his rifle down, leaning it against a fallen log; then began his work.

It was an awkward place to stand; but he gave no thought to it. His mind dwelt steadily on the events in the cavern of the hour before; the girl's remorse in the instant that she had him at her mercy and the example it set for him. The blade bit into the wood with slow encroachments. Perhaps the expenditure of brute energy in swinging the axe would relieve his pent-up feelings.

He was not watching his work. His blows struck true from habit. Now the tree was half-severed: it was time to cut on the opposite side. Suddenly his axe crashed into yielding, rotten wood.

Instantly the powers of the wilderness took their long-awaited toll. Ben had been unwary, too absorbed by his swirling thoughts to mark the ambush of death that had been prepared for him. Ever to keep watch, ever to be on guard: such is the first law of the wild; and Ben had disregarded it. Half of the tree had been rotten, changing the direction of its fall and crashing it down before its time.

Ben leaped for his life, instinctively aiming for the shelter of the log against which he had inclined his rifle; but the blow came too soon. He was aware only of the rush of air as he leaped, an instant's hovering at the crest of a depthless chasm, then the sense of a mighty, resistless blow hurling him into infinity.

Ben's rifle, catching the full might of the blow, was broken like a match. Ben himself was crushed to earth as beneath a meteor, the branchy trunk shattering down upon his stalwart form like the jaws of a great trap. He uttered one short, half-strangled cry.

Then the darkness, shot with varied and multiple lights, dropped over him. The noise of the falling tree died away; the forest-dwellers returned to their varied activities. The rain clouds deepened and spread above his motionless form.

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XXXIV

Beatrice's dreams were troubled after Ben's departure into the forest. She tossed and murmured, secretly aware that all was not well with her. Yet in the moments that she half-wakened she ascribed the vague warning to nervousness only, falling immediately to sleep again. Wakefulness came vividly to her only with the beginnings of twilight.

She opened her eyes; the cavern was deep with shadow. She lay resting a short time, adjusting her eyes to the soft light. In an instant all the dramatic events of the day were recalled to her: the tin cup that had held the poison still lay against the wall, and the liquor still stained the sandy floor, or was it only a patch of deeper shadow?

She wondered why Ben did not come into the cave. Was he embittered against her, after all; had he spoken as he did just from kindness, to save her remorse? She listened for the familiar sounds of his fuel cutting, or his other work about the camp. Wherever he was, he made no sound at all.

She sat up then, staring out through the cavern maw. For an instant she experienced a deep sense of bewilderment at the pressing gloom, so mysterious and unbroken over the face of the land. But soon she understood what was missing. The fire was out.

The fact went home to her with an inexplicable shock. She had become so accustomed to seeing the bright, cheerful blaze at the cavern mouth that its absence was like a little tragedy in itself. Always it had been the last vista of her closing eyes as she dropped off to sleep—the soft, warm glow of the coals—and the sight always comforted her. She could scarcely remember the morning that it wasn't crackling cheerily when she wakened. Ben had always been so considerate of her in this regard—removing the chill of the cave with its radiating heat to make it comfortable for her to dress. Not even coals were left now—only ashes, gray as death.

She got up, then walked to the cavern maw. For a moment she stood peering into the gloom, one hand resting against the portals of stone. The twilight was already deep. It was the supper hour and past; dark night was almost at hand. There could be no further doubt of Ben's absence. He was not at the little creek getting water, nor did she hear the ring of his axe in the forest. She wondered if he had gone out on one of his scouting expeditions and had not yet returned. Of course this was the true explanation; she had no real cause to worry.

Likely enough he had little desire to return to the cavern now. She could picture him following at his tireless pace one of the winding woods trails, lost in contemplation, his vivid eyes clouded with thought.

She looked up for the sight of the familiar stars that might guide him home. They were all hidden to-night. Not a gleam of light softened the stark gloom of the spruce. As she watched the first drops of rain fell softly on the grass.

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The drops came in ever-increasing frequency, cold as ice on her hand. She heard them rustling in the spruce boughs; and far in the forest she discerned the first whine of the wakening wind. The sound of the rain was no longer soft. It swelled and grew, and all at once the wind caught it and swept it into her face. And now the whole forest moaned and souged under the sweep of the wind.

There is no sound quite like the beat of a hard rain on dense forest. It has no startling discords, but rather a regular cadence as if the wood gods were playing melodies in the minor on giant instruments,—melodies remembered from the first, unhappy days of the earth and on instruments such as men have never seen. But this was never a melody to fill the heart with joy. It touches deep chords of sorrow in the most secret realms of the spirit. The rain song grew and fell as the gusts of the wind swept it, and the rock walls of the cliff swam in clouds of spray.

The storm could not help but bring Ben to camp, she thought. At least she did not fear that he would lose his way: he knew every trail and ridge for miles around the cave. Even such pressing, baleful darkness as this could not bewilder him. She went back to her cot to wait his coming.

The minutes seemed interminable. Time had never moved so slowly before. She tried to lie still, to relax; then to direct her thought in other channels; but all of these meandering streams flowed back into the main current which was Ben. Yet it was folly to worry about him; any moment she would hear his step at the edge of the forest. But the night was so dark, and the storm so wild. A half-hour dragged its interminable length away.

Her uneasiness was swiftly developing into panic. Just to-day she was willing to risk his life for her freedom: it was certainly folly now to goad herself to despair by dwelling on his mysterious absence. It might speed the passing minutes if she got up and found some work to do about the cave; but she simply had no heart for it. Once she sat up, only to lie down again.

The moments dragged by. Surely he would have had time to reach camp by now. The storm neither increased nor decreased; only played its mournful melodies in the forest. The song of the rain was despairing,—low mournful notes rising to a sharp crescendo as the fiercer gusts swept it into the tree tops. The limbs murmured unhappily as they smote together; and a tall tree, swaying in the wind, creaked with a maddening regularity. She was never so lonely before, so darkly miserable.

"I want him to come," her voice suddenly spoke aloud. It rang strangely in the gloomy cave. "I want him to come back to me."

She felt no impulse for the words. They seemed to speak themselves. Presently she sat erect, her heart leaping with inexpressible relief, at the sound of a heavy tread at the edge of the glade.

The steps came nearer, and then paused. She sprang to her feet and went to the mouth of the cave. A silence that lived between the beating rain and the complaining wind settled down about her. Her eyes could not pierce the darkness.

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"Is that you, Ben?" she called.

She strained into the silence for his reply. The cold drops splashed into her face.

"Ben?" she called again. "Is that you?"

Then something leaped with an explosive sound, and running feet splashed in the wet grass in flight. The little spruce trees at the edge of the glade whipped and rustled as a heavy body crashed through. The steps had been only those of some forest beast—a caribou, perhaps, or a moose—come to mock her despair.

She remembered that Ben had been wishing for just such a visitation these past few days; of course in the daylight hours when he could see to shoot. Their meat supply was almost gone.

She did not go to her cot again. She stood peering into the gloom. All further effort to repel her fears came to nothing. The storm was already of two hours' duration, and Ben would have certainly returned to the cave unless disaster had befallen him. Was he lost somewhere in the intertwining trails, seeking shelter in a heavy thicket until the dawn should show him his way? There were so many pitfalls for the unsuspecting in these trackless wilds.

Yet she could be of no aid to him. The dark woods stretched interminably; she would not even know which way to start. It would just mean to be lost herself, should she attempt to seek him. The trails that wound through the glades and over the ridges had no end.

"Ben!" she called again. Then with increasing volume. "Ben!"

But no echo returned. The darkness swallowed the sound at once.

The night was chill: she longed for the comfort of the fire. The actual labor of building it might take her mind from her fears for a while at least; and its warm glow might dispel the growing cold of fear and loneliness in her breast. Besides, it might be a beacon light for Ben. She turned at once to the pile of kindling Ben had prepared.

But before she could build a really satisfactory fire, one that would endure the rain, she must cut fuel from some of the logs Ben had hewn down and dragged to the cave. She lighted a short piece of pitchy wood, intending to locate the heavy camp axe. Then, putting on her heavy coat—the same garment of lustrous fur which Ben had sent her back for the day of her abduction—she ventured into the storm.

The rain splashed in vain at her torch. The pitch burned with a fierce flame. But her eyes sought in vain for the axe.

This was a strange thing: Ben always left it leaning against one of the chunks of spruce. Presently she halted, startled, gazing into the black depths of the forest.

Ben had taken it; he had plainly gone forth after fuel. Trees stood all about the little glade: he couldn't have gone far. The inference was obvious: whatever disaster had befallen him must have occurred within a few hundred yards of the cave.

Holding her torch high she went to the edge of the glade and again called into the gloom. There was no repression in her voice now. She called as loudly as she could. She started to push on into the fringe of timber.

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But at once she paused, holding hard on her self-control. It was folly to make a blind search. To penetrate the dark mystery of the forest with only this little light—already flickering out—would probably result in becoming lost herself. Such a course would not help Ben's cause. Evidently he was lying within a few hundred feet of her, unconscious—perhaps dead—or he would have replied to her call.

Dead! The thought sped an icy current throughout the hydraulic system of her veins.

She was a mountain girl, and she made no further false motions. She turned at once to the cave, and piling up her kindling, built a fire just at the mouth of the cave. It was protected here in some degree from the rain, and the wind was right to carry the smoke away. This fire would serve to keep her direction and lead her back to the cavern.

Once more she ventured into the storm, and gathering all the cut fuel she could find, piled it on her fire. The two spruce chunks that Ben had cut for their fireside seats were placed as back logs. Then she hunted for pine knots taken from the scrub pines that grew in scattering clumps among the spruce, and which were laden with pitch.

One of these knots she put in the iron pan they used for frying, then lighted it. Then she pushed into the timber.

Holding her light high she began to encircle the glade clear to the barrier of the cliffs. To the eyes of the wild creatures this might have been a never-to-be-forgotten picture: the slight form of the girl, her face blanched and her eyes wide and dark in the flaring light, her grotesque torch and its weird shadows, and then rain sweeping down between. She reached the cliff, then started back, making a wider circle.

Adding fresh fuel to the torch, she peered into every covert and examined with minute care any human-shaped shadow in that eerie world of shadows; but the long half-circle brought her back to the cliff wall without results. She was already wet to the skin, and her pine knots were nearly spent. Ever the load of dread was heavier at her heart. In the hour or more she had searched—she had no way of estimating time—she had already gone farther than Ben usually went for his fuel.

As yet no tears came; only the raindrops lay on her face and curled her dark hair in ringlets. But she must not give up yet. It was hard to hold her shoulders straight; but she must make the long circle once more.

With courage and strength such as she had not dreamed she possessed, she launched forward again. But fatigue was breaking her now. The tree roots tripped her faltering feet, the branches clutched at her as she passed. It was hard to tell what territory she had searched, or how far she had gone. But when she was halfway around, she suddenly halted, motionless as an image, at the edge of the stream.

The flickering light revealed a tree, freshly cut, its, naked stump gleaming and its tall form lying prone. Yet beneath it the shadows were of strange, unearthly shape, and something showed stark white through the green foliage. Great branches stretched over it, like bars over a prison window.

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Just one curious deep sob wracked her whole body. The life-heat, the mystery that is being, seemed to steal away from her. Her strength wilted; and for an instant she could only stand and gaze with fixed, unbelieving eyes. But almost at once the unquenchable fires of her spirit blazed up anew. She saw her task, and with a faith and steadfastness conformable more to the sun and the earth than to human frailty, her muscles made instant and incredible response.

Instantly she was beside the form of her comrade and enemy, struggling with the cruel limbs that pinned him to the earth.

XXXV

Beatrice knew one thing and one alone: that she must not give way to the devastating terror in her heart. There was mighty work to do, and she must keep strong. Her only wish was to kneel beside him, to lift the bleeding head into her arms and let the storm and the darkness smother her existence; but her stern woods training came to her aid. She began the stupendous task of freeing him from the imprisoning tree limbs.

The pine knots flickered feebly; and by their light she looked about for Ben's axe. Her eyes rested on the broken gun first: then she saw the blade, shining in the rain, protruding from beneath a broken bough. She drew it out and swung it down.

Some of the lesser limbs she broke off, with a strength in her hands she did not dream she possessed. The larger ones were cut away with blows incredibly strong and accurate. How and by what might she did not know, but almost at once the man's body was free except for the tree trunk that wedged him against a dead log toward which he had leaped for shelter.

She seemed powerless to move it. Her shoulders surged against it in vain. A desperate frenzy seized her, but she fought it remorselessly down. Her self-discipline must not break yet. Seeing that she could not move the tree itself, she thrust with all her power against the dead log beside which Ben lay. In a moment she had rolled it aside.

Then for the first time she went to her knees beside the prone form. Ben was free of the imprisoning limbs, but was his soul already free of the stalwart body broken among the broken boughs? She had to know this first; further effort was unavailing until she knew this. Her hand stole over his face.

She found no reassuring warmth. It was wet with the rain, cold to the touch. His hair was wet too, and matted from some dreadful wound in the scalp. Very softly she felt along the skull for some dreadful fracture that might have caused instant death; but the descending trunk had missed his head, at least. Very gently she shook him by the shoulders.

Her stern self-control gave way a little now. The strain had been too much for human nerves to bear. She gathered him into her arms, still without sobbing, but the hot tears dropped on to his face.

“Speak to me, Ben,” she said quietly. The wind caught her words and whisked them away; and the rain played its unhappy music in the tree foliage; but Ben made no answer. “Speak to me,” she repeated, her tone lifting. “My man, my baby—tell me you’re not dead!”

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Dead! Was that it—struck to the earth like the caribou that fell before his rifle? And in that weird, dark instant a light far more bright than that the flickering pine knots cast so dim and strange over the scene beamed forth from the altar flame of her own soul. It was only the light of knowledge, not of hope, but it transfigured her none the less.

All at once she knew why she had hurled the poisoned cup from his hand, even though her father's life might be the price of her weakness. She understood, now, why these long weeks had been a delight rather than a torment; why her fears for him had gone so straight to her heart. She pressed his battered head tight against her breast.

"My love, my love," she crooned in his ear, pressing her warm cheek close to his. "I do love you, I do, I do," she told him confidently, as if this message would call him back to life. Her lips sought his, trying to give them warmth, and her voice was low and broken when she spoke again. "Can't you hear me, Ben—won't you try to come back to me? If you're dead I'll die too—"

But the man did not open his eyes. Would not even this appeal arouse him from this deep, strange sleep in which he lay? He had always been so watchful of her—since that first day—so zealous for her safety. She held him closer, her lips trembling against his.

But she must get herself in hand again! Perhaps life had not yet completely flickered out; and she could nurse it back. She dropped her ear to his breast, listening.

Yes, she felt the faint stirring of his heart. It was so feeble, the throbs were so far apart, yet they meant life,—life that might flush his cheeks again, and might yet bring him back to her, into her arms. He was breathing, too; breaths so faint that she hardly dared to believe in their reality. And presently she realized that his one hope of life lay in getting back to the fire.

For long hours he had been lying in the cold rain; a few more minutes would likely extinguish the spark of life that remained in his breast. Her hand stole over his powerful frame, in an effort to get some idea of the nature of his wounds.

One of his arms was broken; its position indicated that. Some of his ribs were crushed too—what internal injuries he had that might end him before the morning she did not know. But she could not take time to build a sledge and cut away the brush. She worked her shoulder under his body.

Wrenching with all her fine, young strength she lifted him upon her shoulder; then, kneeling in the vines, she struggled for breath. Then thrusting with her arm she got on her feet.



His weight was over fifty pounds greater than her own; but her woods training, the hard work she had always done, had fitted her for just such a test as this. She started with her burden toward the cave.

She had long known how to carry an injured man, suspending him over her shoulder, head pointed behind her, her arms clasping his thigh. With her free arm she seized the tree branches to sustain her. She had no light now; she was guided only by the faint glow of the fire at the cavern mouth.

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After a hundred feet the load seemed unbearable. Except for the fact that she soon got on the well-worn moose trail that followed the creek, she could scarcely have progressed a hundred feet farther. As it was, she was taxed to the utmost: every ounce of her reserve strength would be needed before the end.

At the end of a hundred yards she stopped to rest, leaning against a tree and still holding the beloved weight upon her shoulder. If she laid it down she knew she could not lift it again. But soon she plunged on, down toward the beacon light.

Except for her love for him, and that miraculous strength that love has always given to women, she could not have gone on that last, cruel hundred yards. But slowly, steadily, the circle of light grew brighter, larger, nearer; ever less dense were the thickets of evergreen between. Now she was almost to the glade; now she felt the wet grass at her ankles. She lunged on and laid her burden on her bed.

Then she relaxed at his feet, breathing in sobbing gasps. Except for the crackle of the fire and the beat of the rain, there was no sound in the cave but this,—those anguished sobs from her wracked lungs.

But far distant though Ben was and deep as he slept—just outside the dark portals of death itself—those sounds went down to him. He heard them dimly at first, like a far-distant voice in a dream, but as the moments passed he began to recognize their nature and their source. Sobs of exhaustion and distress—from the girl that was in his charge. He lay a long time, trying to understand.

On her knees beside him Beatrice saw the first flutter of his eyelids. In awe, rather than rapture, her arms crept around him, and she kissed his rain-wet brow. His eyes opened, looking wonderingly into hers.

She saw the first light of recognition, then a half-smile, gentle as a girl's, as he realized his own injuries. Of course Ben Darby would smile in such a moment as this; his instincts, true and manly, were always to try to cheer her. Presently he spoke in the silence.

"The tree got me, didn't it?" he asked.

"Don't try to talk," she cautioned. "Yes—the tree fell on you. But you're not going to die. You're going to live, live—"

He shook his head, the half-smile flickering at his lips. "Let me talk, Beatrice," he said, with just a whisper of his old determination. "It's important—and I don't think—I have much time."

Her eyes widened in horror. "You don't mean—"

“I’m going back in a minute—I can’t hardly keep awake,” he said. His voice, though feeble, was preternaturally clear. She heard every kind accent, every gentle tone even above the crackle of the fire without and the beat of the rain. “I think it’s the limit,” he went on. “I believe the tree got me—clear inside—but you must listen to everything I say.”

She nodded. In that eerie moment of suspense she knew she must hear what he had to tell her.

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"Don't wait to see what happens to me," he went on. "I'll either go out or I'll live—you really can't help me any. Where's the rifle?"

"The rifle was broken—when the tree fell."

"I knew it would be. I saw it coming." He rested, waiting for further breath. "Beatrice—please, please don't stay here, trying to save me."

"Do you think I would go?" she cried.

"You must. The food—is about gone. Just enough to last one person through to the Yuga cabins—with berries, roots. Take the pistol. There's six shots or so—in the box. Make every one tell. Take the dead grouse too. The rifle's broken and we can't get meat. It's just—death—if you wait. You can just make it through now."

"And leave you here to die, as long as there's a chance to save you?" the girl answered. "You couldn't get up to get water—or build a fire—"

He listened patiently, but shook his head at the end. "No, Bee—please don't make me talk any more. It's just death for both of us if you stay. The food is gone—the rifle broken. Your father's gang'll be here sooner or later—and they'd smash me, anyway. I could hardly fight 'em off with those few pistol shells—but by God I'd like to try—"

He struggled for breath, and she thought he had slipped back into unconsciousness. But in a moment the faltering current of his speech began again.

"Take the pistol—and go," he told her. "You showed me to-day how to give up—and I don't want to kill—your father—any more. I renounce it all! Ezram—forgive me—old Ez that lay dead in the leaves." He smiled at the girl again. "So don't mind leaving me. Life work's all spent—given over. Please, Beatrice—you'd just kill yourself without aiding me. Wait till the sun comes up—then follow up the river—"

Unconsciousness welled high above him, and the lids dropped over his eyes. The gloom still pressed about the cavern, yet a sun no less effulgent than that of which he had spoken had risen for Ben. It was his moment of renunciation, glorious past any moment of his life. He had renounced his last, little fighting chance that the girl might live. And Ezram, watching high and afar, and with infinite serenity knowing at last the true balance of all things one with another, gave him his full forgiveness.

The girl began to strip the wet clothes from his injured body.

XXXVI

The trail was long and steep into Back There for Jeffery Neilson and his men. Day after day they traveled with their train of pack horses, pushing deeper into the wilds, fording mighty rivers, traversing silent and majestic mountain ranges, climbing slopes so steep that the packs had to be lightened to half before the gasping animals could reach the crest. They could go only at a snail's pace,—even in the best day's travel only ten miles, and often a single mile was a hard, exhausting day's work.

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Of course there was no kind of a trail for them to follow. As far as possible they followed the winding pathways of big game—as long as these led them in their general direction—but often they were obliged to cut their way through the underbrush. Time after time they encountered impassable cliffs or rivers from which they were obliged to turn back and seek new routes; they found marshes that they could not penetrate; ranges they could not climb; wastes of slide rock where they could make headway only at a creeping pace and with hourly risk of their lives.

They had counted on slow travel, but the weeks grew into the months before they even neared the obscure heart of Back There where they thought Ben and Beatrice might be hidden. The way was hard as they had never dreamed. Every day, it seemed to them, brought its fresh tragedy: a long back-trailing to avoid some impassable place, a fatiguing digression, perhaps several hours of grinding work with the axe in order to cut a trail. Sometimes the harness broke, requiring long stops on the trail to repair it, the packs slipped continually from the hard going; and they found it increasingly difficult to secure horse feed for the animals.

Even Indian ponies cannot keep fat on such grass as grows in the deep shade of the spruce. They need the rich growths of the open park lands to stiffen them for the grinding toil; and even with good feeding, foresters know that pack animals must not be kept on the trail for too many days in succession. Jeffery Neilson and his men disregarded both these facts, with the result that the animals lost flesh and strength, cutting down the speed of their advance. Oaths and shouts were unavailing now: only cruel blows could drive them forward at all.

They seemed to sense a great hopelessness in their undertaking. Usually well-trained pack horses will follow their leader without question, walk almost in his tracks, and the rider in front only has to show the way. After the first few days of grinding toil, the morale of the entire outfit began to break. The horses broke away into thickets on each side; and time after time, one hour upon another, the horsemen had to round them up again. When they came to the great rivers—wild tributaries of the Yuga—they had to follow up the streams for days in search of a place to ford. Then they were obliged to carry the packs across in small loads, making trip after trip with the utmost patience and toil. The horses, broken in spirit, took the wild waters just as they climbed the steep slopes, with little care whether they lived or died.

The days passed, June and July. Ever they moved at a slower pace. One of the horses, giving up on a steep pitch and frenzied by Ray's cruel, lashing blows, fell off the edge of the trail and shot down like a plummet two hundred feet into the canyon below—and thereupon it became necessary not only to spend the rest of the day in retrieving and repairing the supplies that had fallen with him, but also to heap bigger loads on the backs of the remaining horses. And always they were faced by the cruel possibility that this whole, mighty labor was in vain,—that Ben and Beatrice might have gone to their deaths in the rapids, weeks before.

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The food stores brought for the journey were rapidly depleted. The result was that they had to depend more and more upon a diet of meat. Men can hold up fairly well on meat alone, particularly if it has a fair amount of fat, but the effort of hunting and drying the flesh into jerky served to cut down their speed.

The constant delays, the grinding, blasting toil of the day's march, and particularly the ever-recurring crises of ford and steep, made serious inroads on the morale of the three men. Just the work of urging on the exhausted horses drained their nervous energy in a frightful stream: the uncertainty of their quest, the danger, the scarcity of any food but meat, and most of all the burning hatred in their hearts for the man who had forced the expedition upon them combined to torment them; even now, Ben Darby had received no little measure of vengeance.

No experience of their individual lives had ever presented such a daily ordeal of physical distress; none had ever been so devastating to hope and spirit. There was not one moment of pleasure, one instant of relief from the day's beginning to its end. At night they went to sleep on hastily made beds, cursing at all things in heaven and earth; they blasphemed with growing savagery all that men hold holy and true; and degeneracy grew upon them very swiftly. They quarreled over their tasks, and they hated each other with a hatred only second to that they bore Darby himself. All three had always been reckless, wicked, brutal men; but now, particularly in the case of Ray and Chan, the ordeal brought out and augmented the latent abnormalities that made them criminals in the beginning, developing those odd quirks in human minds that make toward perversion and the most fiendish crime.

Jeffery Neilson had almost forgotten the issue of the claim by now. He had told the truth, those weary weeks before, when he had wished he had never seen it. His only thought was of his daughter, the captive of a relentless, merciless man in these far wilds. Never the moon rose or the sun declined but that he was sick with haunting fear for her. Had she gone down to her death in the rapids? This was Neilson's fondest wish: the enfolding oblivion of wild waters would be infinitely better than the fate Ben had hinted at in his letter. Yet he dared not turn back. She might yet live, held prisoner in some far-off cave.

At first all three agreed on this point: that they must not turn back until either Ben was crushed under their heels or they had made sure of his death. Ray had not forgotten that Ben alone stood between him and the wealth and power he had always craved. He dreamed, at first, that the deadly hardships of the journey could be atoned for by years of luxury and ease. His mind was also haunted with dark conjectures as to the fate of Beatrice, but jealousy, rather than concern for her, was the moving impulse.

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Neilson knew his young partner now. He saw clearly at last that Ray was not and had never been a faithful confederate, but indeed a malicious and bitter enemy, only waiting his chance to overthrow his leader. They were still partners in their effort to rescue the girl and slay her abductor; otherwise they were at swords' points. And there would be something more than plain, swift slaying, now. If Neilson could read aright, the actual, physical change that had been wrought in Ray's face foretold no ordinary end for Ben. His features were curiously drawn; and his eyes had a fixed, magnetic, evil light. Occasionally in his darker hours Neilson foresaw even more sinister possibilities in this change in Ray: the abnormal intensity manifest in every look and word, the weird, evil preoccupation that seemed ever upon him. There was not only the fate of Ben to consider, but that of Beatrice too, out in these desolate forests. But surely Ray's degenerate impulses could be mastered. Neilson need not fear this, at least.

Chan Heminway, also, had developed marvelously in the journey. He also was more assertive, less the underling he had been. He had developed a brutality that, though it contained nothing of the exquisite fineness of cruelty of which Ray's diseased thought might conceive, was nevertheless the full expression of his depraved nature. He no longer cowered in fear of Neilson. Rather he looked to Ray as his leader, took him as his example, tried to imitate him, and at last really began to share in his mood. In cruelty to the horses he was particularly adept; but he was also given to strange, savage bursts of insane fury.

"We must be close on them now," Neilson said one morning when they had left the main gorge of the Yuga far behind them. "If they're not dead we're bound to find trace of 'em in a few days."

The hope seemed well-founded. It is impossible for even most of the wild creatures—furtive as twilight shadows—to journey through wood spaces without leaving trace of their goings and comings: much less clumsy human beings. Ultimately the searchers would find their tracks in the soft earth, the ashes of a camp fire, or a charred cooking rack.

"And when we get 'em, we can wait and live on meat until the river goes up in fall—then float on down to the Indian villages in their canoe," Chan answered. "It will carry four of us, all right."

Ray, Chan, Neilson and Neilson's daughter—these made four. What remained of Ben when Ray was through could be left, silent upon some hushed hillside, to the mercy of the wild creatures and the elements.

Surely they were in the enemy-country now; and now a fresh fear began to oppress them. They might expect an attack from their implacable foe at any moment. It did not make for ease of mind to know that any brush clump might be their enemy's ambush; that any instant a concealed rifle might speak death to them in the silence. Ben would

have every advantage of fortress and ambush. They had not thought greatly of this matter at first; but now the fear increased with the passing days. Even Neilson was not wholly exempt from it. It seemed a hideous, deadly thing, incompatible with life and hope, that they should be plunging deeper, farther into helplessness and peril.

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If mental distress and physical discomfort can constitute vengeance Ben was already avenged. Now that they were in the hill-lands, out from the gorge and into a region of yellow beaver meadows lying between gently sloping hills, their apprehension turned to veritable terror. A blind man could see how small was their fighting chance against a hidden foe who had prepared for their coming. The skin twitched and crept when a twig cracked about their camp at night, and a cold like death crept over the frame when the thickets crashed under a leaping moose.

Ray found himself regretting, for the first time, that murderous crime of his of months before. Even riches might not pay for these days of dread and nights of terror: the recovery of the girl from Ben's arms could not begin to recompense. Indeed, the girl's memory was increasingly hard to call up. The mind was kept busy elsewhere.

"We're walking right into a death trap," he told Neilson one morning. "If he is here, what chance have we got; he'd have weeks to explore the country and lay an ambush for us. Besides, I believe he's dead. I don't believe a human being could have got down this far, alive."

Chan too had found himself inclining toward this latter belief; without Ray's energy and ambition he had less to keep him fronted to the chase. Neilson, however, was not yet ready to turn back. He too feared Ben's attack, but already in the twilight of advancing years, he did not regard physical danger in the same light as these two younger men. Besides, he was made of different stuff. The safety of his daughter was the one remaining impulse in his life.

And more and more, in the chill August nights, the talk about the camp fire took this trend: the folly of pushing on. It was better to turn back and wait his chances to strike again, Ray argued, than to walk bald-faced into death. Sometime Ben must return to the claim: a chance might come to lay him low. Besides, ever it seemed more probable that the river had claimed him.

One rainy, disagreeable morning, as they camped beside the river near the mouth of a small creek, affairs reached their crisis. They had caught and saddled the horses; Ray was pulling tight the last hitch. Chan stood beside him, speaking in an undertone. When he had finished Ray cursed explosively in the silence.

Neilson turned. He seemed to sense impending developments. "What now?" he asked.

"I'm not going on, that's what it is," Ray replied. "Neilson, it's two against one—if you want to go on you can—but Ray and I are going back. That devil's dead. Beatrice is, too—sure as hell. If they ain't dead, he'll get us. I was a fool ever to start out. And that's final."

"You're going back, eh—scared out!" Neilson commented coldly.

“I’m going back—and don’t say too much about being scared out, either.”

“And you too, Chan? You’re against me, too?”

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Chan cursed. "I'd gone a week ago if it'd been me. We knew the way home, at least."

The old man looked a long time into the river depths. Only too well he realized that their decision was final. But there was no answer, in the swirling depths, to the question that wracked his heart: whether or not in these spruce-clad hills his daughter still lived. It could only murmur and roar, without shaping words that human ears could grasp, never relieving the dreadful uncertainty that would be his life's curse from henceforth. He sighed, and the lines across his brow were dark and deep.

"Then turn the horses around, you cowards," he answered. "I can't go on alone."

For once neither Ray nor Chan had outward resentment for the epithet. Secretly they realized that old Neilson was to the wall at last, and like a grizzly at bay, it was safer not to molest him. Chan went down to the edge of the creek to water his saddle horse.

But presently they heard him curse, in inordinate and startled amazement, as he gazed at some imprint in the mud of the shore. They saw the color sweep from his face. In an instant his two companions were beside him.

Clear and unmistakable in the mud they saw the stale imprint of Ben's canoe as they had landed, and the tracks of both the man and the girl as they had turned into the forest.

XXXVII

The dawn that crept so gray and mysterious over the frosty green of spruce brought no hope to Beatrice, sitting beside the unconscious form of Ben in the cave fronting the glade. Rather it only brought the tragic truth home more clearly. Her love for him had manifested itself too late to give happiness to either of them: even now his life seemed to be stealing from her, into the valley of the shadow.

She had watched beside him the whole night; and now she beheld a sinister change in his condition. He was still unconscious, but he no longer drew his breath at long intervals, softly and quietly. He was breathing in short, troubled gasps, and an ominous red glow was in his cheeks. She touched his brow, only to find it burning with fever.

The fact was not hard to understand. The downpour of cold rain in which he had lain, wounded, for so many hours had drawn the life heat out of him, and some organic malady had combined with his bodily injuries to strike out his life. Her predicament was one of absolute helplessness. She was hundreds of miles—weary weeks of march—from medical attention, and she could neither leave him nor carry him. The wilderness forces, resenting the intrusion into their secret depths, had seemingly taken full vengeance at last. They had seemingly closed all gates to life and safety. They had set the trap with care; and the cruel jaws had sprung.

She sat dry-eyed, incoherent prayers at her trembling lips. Mostly she did not touch the man, only sat at his bedside in the crude chair Ben had fashioned for her while the minutes rolled into hours and the hours sped the night away,—in tireless vigil, watching with lightless eyes. Once she bent and touched her lips to his.

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They were not cold now. They were warm with fever. But in the strange twilight-world of unconsciousness he could neither know of nor respond to her kiss. She patted down his covering and sometimes held his hard hands warm between hers, as if she could thus keep death from seizing them and leading him away. But her courage did not break again.

The wan light showed her his drawn face; and just for an instant her arms pressed about it. "I won't give up, Ben," she promised. "I'll keep on fighting—to the last minute. And maybe I can pull you through."

Beatrice meant exactly what she said: to the last minute. That did not mean to the gray hour when, by all dictate of common sense, further fight is useless. She meant that she would battle tirelessly as long as one pale spark glowed in his spirit, as long as his breath could cloud a glass. The best thing for her now, however, was rest. She was exhausted by the strain of the night; and she must save herself for the crisis that was sure to come. Ben was sleeping easily now; the instant when his life hung in the balance still impended.

She built up the fire, put on water to heat, covered the man with added blankets, then lay down on Ben's cot. Soon she drifted into uneasy slumber, waking at intervals to serve her patient.

The hours dragged by, the night sloped down to the forest; and the dawn followed the night. Ben's life still flickered, like a flame in the wind, in the twilight land between life and death.

Yet little could she do for him these first few days, except, in her simple faith, to pray. Never an hour passed but that prayers were at her lips, childlike, direct, entreating prayers from her woman's heart. Of all her offices these were first: she had no doubt but that they counted most. She sat by his bedside, kept him covered with the warmest robes, hewed wood for the fire; but as yet he had never fully emerged from his unconsciousness. Would he slip away in the night without ever waking?

But in the morning of the fourth day he opened his eyes vividly, muttered, and fell immediately to sleep. He woke again at evening; and his moving lips conveyed a message. In response she brought him steaming grouse broth, administering it a spoonful at a time until he fell to sleep again.

In the days that followed he was conscious to the degree that he could drink broth, yet never recognizing Beatrice nor seeming to know where he was. His fever still lingered, raging; yet in these days she began to notice a slow improvement in his condition. The healing agents of his body were hard at work; and doubt was removed that he had received mortal internal injuries. She had set his broken arm the best she could, holding the bones in place with splints; but in all likelihood it would have to be broken

and set again when he reached the settlements. She began to notice the first cessation of his fever; although weeks of sickness yet remained, she believed that the crisis was past. Yet in spite of these hopeful signs, she was face to face with the most tragic situation of all. Their food was almost gone.



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It would be long weeks before Ben could hope for sufficient strength to start the journey down to the settlements, even if the way were open. As it was their only chance lay in the fall rains that would flood the Yuga and enable them to journey down to the native villages in their canoe. These rains would not fall till October. For all that she had hoarded their supplies to the last morsel, eating barely enough herself to sustain life in her body, the dread spectre of starvation waited just without the cave. She had realized perfectly that Ben could not hope to throw off the malady without nutritious food and she had not stinted with him; and now, just when she had begun to hope for his recovery, she shook the last precious cup of flour from the sack.

The rice and sugar were gone, long since. The honey she had hoarded to give Ben—knowing its warming, nutritive value—not tasting a drop herself. Of all their stores only a few pieces of jerked caribou remained; she had used the rest to make rich broth for Ben, and there was no way under heaven whereby they might procure more.

The rifle was broken. The last of the pistol shots was fired the day she had prepared the poisoned cup for Ben.

Yet she still waged the fight, struggling with high courage and tireless resolution against the frightful odds that opposed her. Her faith was as of that nameless daughter of the Gileadite; and she could not yield. Not ambition, not hatred—not even such fire of fury as had been awakened in Wolf Darby's heart that first frenzied night on the hillside—could have been the impulse for such fortitude and sacrifice as hers. It was not one of these base passions—known in the full category to her rescuers who were even now bearing down upon her valley—that kept the steel in her thews and the steadfastness in her heart. She loved this man; her love for him was as wholesome and as steadfast as her own self; and the law of that love was to give him all she had.

There were few witnesses to this infinite giving of hers. Ben himself still lingered in a strange stupor, remembering nothing, knowing neither the girl nor himself. Perhaps the wild things saw her desperate efforts to find food in the wilderness,—the long hours of weary searching for a handful of berries that gave such little nourishment to his weakened body, or for a few acorns stored for winter by bird or rodent. Sometimes a great-antlered moose—an easy trophy if the rifle had been unbroken—saw her searching for wocus like a lost thing in the tenacious mud of the marshes; and almost nightly a silent wolf, pausing in his hunting, gazed uneasily through the cavern maw. But mostly her long hours of service in the cave, the chill nights that she sat beside Ben's cot, the dreary mornings when she cooked her own scanty breakfast and took her uneasy rest, the endless labor of fire-mending so that the cave could be kept at an even heat went unobserved by mortal eyes. The healing forces of his body called for warmth and nourishment; but for all the might of her efforts she waged a losing fight.

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What little wocus she was able to find she made into bread for Ben; yet it was never enough to satisfy his body's craving. The only meat she had herself was the vapid flesh that had been previously boiled for Ben's broth; and now only a few pieces of the jerked meat remained. She herself tried to live on such plants as the wilderness yielded, and she soon began to notice the tragic loss of her own strength. Her eyes were hollow, preternaturally large; she experienced a strange, floating sensation, as if spirit and flesh were disassociated.

Still Ben lingered in his mysterious stupor, unaware of what went on about him; but his fever was almost gone by now, and the first beginnings of strength returned to his thews. His mind had begun to grope vaguely for the key that would open the doors of his memory and remind him again of some great, half-forgotten task that still confronted him, some duty unperformed. Yet he could not quite seize it. The girl who worked about his cot was without his bourne of knowledge; her voice reached him as if from an infinite distance, and her words penetrated only to the outer edges of his consciousness. It was not strictly, however, a return of his amnesia. It was simply an outgrowth of delirium caused by his sickness and injuries, to be wholly dispelled as soon as he was wholly well.

But now the real hour of crisis was at hand,—not from his illness, but from the depletion of their food supplies. Beatrice had spent a hard afternoon in the forest in search of roots and berries, and as she crept homeward, exhausted and almost empty-handed, the full, tragic truth was suddenly laid bare. Her own strength had waned. Without the miracle of a fresh food supply she could hardly keep on her feet another day. Plainly and simply, the wolf was at the door. His cruel fangs menaced not only her, but this stalwart man for whose life she had fought so hard.

The fear of the obliterating darkness known to all the woods people pressed close upon her and appalled her. She loved life simply and primitively; and it was an unspeakable thing to lose at the end of such a battle. Out so far, surrounded by such endless, desolate wastes of gloomy forest, the Shadow was cold, inhospitable; and she was afraid to face it alone. If Ben would only waken and sustain her drooping spirit with his own! She was lonely and afraid, in the shadow of the inert spruce, under the gray sky.

She could hardly summon strength for the evening's work of cutting fuel. The blade would not drive with its old force into the wood. The blaze itself burned dully; and she could not make it leap and crackle with its old cheer. And further misfortune was in store for her when she crept into the cave to prepare Ben's supper.

A pack rat—one of those detested rodents known so well to all northern peoples—had carried off in her absence two of the three remaining sticks of jerked caribou. For a moment she gazed in unbelieving and speechless horror, then made a frenzied search in the darkened corners of the cabin.

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This was no little tragedy: the two sticks of condensed and concentrated protein might have kept Ben alive for a few days more. It was disaster, merciless and sweeping. And the brave heart of the girl seemed to break under the blow.

The hot, bitter tears leaped forth; but she suppressed the bitter, hopeless sobs that clutched at her throat. She must not let Ben know of this catastrophe. Likely in his stupor he would not understand; yet she must not take the chance. She must nourish the spark of hope in his breast to the last hour. She walked to the mouth of the cave; and Famine itself stood close, waiting in the shadows. She gazed out into the gathering gloom.

The tears blinded her eyes at first. Slowly the dark profile of the spruce against the gray sky penetrated to her consciousness: the somber beauty of the wilderness sky line that haunts the woodsman's dreams. With it came full realization of the might and the malevolency of these shadowed wilds she had battled so long. They had got her down at last; they had crushed her and beaten her, and had held up to scorn her sacrifice and her mortal strength. She knew the wild wood now: its savage power, its remorselessness, and yet, woods girl that she was, she could not forget its dark and moving beauty.

The forest was silent to-night. Not a twig cracked or a branch rustled. It was hushed, breathless, darkly sinister. All at once her eyes peered and strained into the dusk.

Far across the valley, beyond the beaver marsh and on the farther shore of the lake she saw a little glimmer of light through the rift in the trees. She dared not believe in its reality at first. Perhaps it was a trick of her imagination only, a hallucination born of her starvation, child of her heartfelt prayer. She looked away, then peered again. But, yes—a tiny gleam of yellow light twinkled through the gloom! It was real, *it was true!* A gleam of hope in the darkness of despair.

Her rescuers had come. There could be no other explanation. She hastened into the cave, drew the blankets higher about Ben's shoulders, then crept out into the dusk. Half running, she hastened toward their distant camp fire.

XXXVIII

Beatrice's first impulse was to run at a breakneck pace down the ridge and about the lake into her father's camp, beseeching instant aid to the starving man in the cave. She wished that she had a firearm with which to signal to them and bring them at once to the cavern. And it was not until she had descended the ridge and stood at the edge of the beaver meadow that her delirious joy began to give way to serious, thought.



She was brought to a halt first by the sight of the horses that had wandered about the long loop of the lake and were feeding in the rich grass of the meadow. The full moon rising in the east had cast a nebulous glow over the whole countryside by now; and she could make a hasty estimation of their numbers. It was evident at once that her father had not made the expedition alone. The large outfit implied a party of at least three,—indicating that Ray Brent and Chan Heminway had accompanied him.

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She had only fear and disdain for these two younger men; but surely they would not refuse aid to Ben. Yet perhaps it was best to proceed with some caution. These were her lover's enemies; if for no other reason than their rage at her own abduction they might be difficult to control. Her father, in all probability, would willingly show mercy to the helpless man in the cavern—particularly after she told him of Ben's consideration and kindness—but she put no faith in Ray and Chan. She knew them of old. Besides, she remembered there was a further consideration,—that of a gold claim.

Could Ben have told her the truth when he had maintained that they would kill him on sight if he did not destroy them first? Was it true that he had waged the war in defense of his own rights? Weeks and months had passed since she had seen her father's face: perhaps her old control of him could no longer be relied upon. If indeed their ownership of a rich claim depended upon Ben's death, Ray and Chan could not be trusted at all.

She resolved to proceed with the utmost caution. Abruptly she turned out of the beaver marsh, where the moonlight might reveal her, and followed close to the edge of the timber, a course that could not be visible from beyond the lake. She approached the lake at its far neck, then followed back along the margin clear to the edge of the woods in which the fire was built.

In her years in the woods Beatrice had learned to stalk, and the knowledge was of value to her now. With never a misstep she took down a little game trail toward the camp fire. She was within fifty yards of it now—she could make out three dark figures seated in the circle of firelight. Walking softly but upright she pushed within ninety feet of the fire.

Then she waited, in doubt as to her course. She was still too far distant to hear more than the murmur of their voices. If she could just get near enough to catch their words she could probably glean some idea of their attitude toward Ben. She pushed on nearer, through the dew-wet brush.

Impelled by the excitement under which she advanced, her old agility of motion had for the moment returned to her; and she crept softly as a fawn between the young trees. One misstep, one rustling branch or crackling twig might give her away; but she took each step with consummate care, gently thrusting the tree branches from her path.

Once a rodent stirred beneath her feet, and she froze—like a hunting wolf—in her tracks. One of the three men looked up, and she saw his face plainly through the low spruce boughs. And for a moment she thought that this was a stranger. It was with a distinct foreboding of disaster that she saw, on second glance, that the man was Ray Brent.

She had never seen such change in human countenance in the space of a few months. She did not pause to analyze it. She only knew that his eyes were glittering and fixed;

and that she herself was deeply, unexplainably appalled. The man cursed once, blasphemously, his face dusky and evil in the eerie firelight, but immediately turned back to his talk. Beatrice crept closer.

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Now she was near enough to catch an occasional word, but not discern their thoughts. It was evident, however, that their conversation was of Ben and herself,—the same topic they had discussed nights without end. She caught her own name; once Chan used an obscene epithet as he spoke of their enemy.

Her instincts were true and infallible to-night; and she was ever more convinced of their deadly intentions toward Ben. It was not wise to announce herself yet. Perhaps she would have to rely upon a course other than a direct appeal for aid. Now her keen eyes could see the whole camp: the three seated figures of the men, their rifles leaning near them, their supplies spread out about the fire.

At one side, quite to the edge of the firelight, she saw a kyack—one of those square boxes that are hung on a pack saddle—which seemed to be heaped with jerked caribou or moose flesh. For the time of a breath she could not take her eyes from it. It was food—food in plenty to sustain Ben through his illness and the remaining weeks of their exile—and her eyes moistened and her hands trembled at the sight. She had been taught the meaning of famine, these last, bitter days. In reality she was now in the first stage of starvation, experiencing the first, vague hallucinations, the sense of incorporeality, the ever-declining strength, the constant yearning that is nothing but the vitals' submerged demand for food. The contents of the kyack meant *life* to herself and to Ben,—deliverance and safety when all seemed lost.

A daughter of the cities far to the south—even a child of poverty—rarely could have understood the unutterable craving that overswept her at the sight of this simple food. It was unadorned, unaccompanied by the delicacies that most human beings have come to look upon as essentials and to expect with every meal: it was only animal flesh dried in the smoke and the sun. It not only attracted her physically; but in that moment it possessed real objective beauty for her; as it would have possessed for the most cultivated esthete that might be standing in her place. This girl was down to the most stern realities, and life and death hung in the balance.

She went on her hands and knees, creeping nearer. Still she did not make the slightest false motion, creeping with an uncanny silence in the under shrubbery. And now the words came plain.

"But we must be near," Chan was saying. "They can't be more than a mile or so from here. We'll find 'em in the morning—"

"If he doesn't find us first and shoot up our camp," Ray replied. "I wish we'd built our fire further into the woods. Here we've looked all day without even finding a track except those tracks in the mud."

"They might be beyond the marsh," Neilson suggested.

“But Chan went over that way and didn’t find a trace,” Ray objected. “But just the same—we’ll make a real search to-morrow. I believe we’ll find the devil. And then—we can leave this hellish country and go back in peace—if we don’t want to wait for the flood.”

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Beatrice's eyes were on his face, wondering what growth of wickedness, what degeneracy had so filled his cruel eyes with light and stamped his face with evil. This was the man to whom she must look for mercy. Ben's life, if she led the three men to the cave, would be in his hands. She sensed from his authoritative tone that her father's control over him was largely broken. She hovered, terrified and motionless, in her covert.

Ray reached for his rifle, glancing at the sights and drawing the lever back far enough to see the brass of its shells. Chan's lean face was drawn with a cruel glee.

"You can't keep your hands off that gun, Ray," he said. "You sure are gettin' anxious."

"I won't use it on him," Ray replied, slowly and carefully. "It's too good for him—except maybe the stock. He didn't lead me clear out here just to see him puff out and blow up in a minute with a rifle ball through his head. Just the same I want the gun near me, all the time."

The two men looked at him, sardonic-eyed; and both of them seemed to understand fully what he meant. They seemed to catch more from the slow tones, so full of lust and frenzy that they seemed to drop from his lips in an ugly monotone, than they did from the words themselves. They took a certain grim amusement in these quirks of abnormal depravity that had begun to manifest themselves in Ray. The man's fingers were wide spread as he spoke, and his lip twitched twice, sharply, when he had finished.

The words came clear and distinct to the listening girl. She tried to take them literally—that Ray would not shoot Ben! *"It's too good for him—except maybe the stock!"* Did he mean *that* too! Was there any possible meaning in the world other than that he was planning some unearthly, more terrible fate for the man she loved! She would not yet yield to the dreadful truth, yet even now terror was clutching at her throat, strangling her; and the cold drops were beading her brow. Still the dark drama of the fireside continued before her eyes.

Chan suddenly turned to Neilson, evidently imbued with Ray's fervor. "What do you think of that, old man?" he asked menacingly. Thus Chan, too, had escaped from Neilson's dominance: plainly Ray was his idol now. It was also plain that he recognized attributes of mercy and decency in his grizzled leader that might interfere with his own and his companion's plans. "What's worrying me—whether you're goin' to join in on the sport when we catch the weasel!"

Sport! The word was more terrible to Beatrice than the vilest oath he had used to emphasize it. She crouched, shivering. Watching intently, she saw Ray look up, too, waiting for the reply; and her father, sensing his lost dominance, bowed his head.

“You could hardly expect me to let him off easy—seeing what he did to my daughter—”

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“What he done to your daughter ain’t all—I don’t care if he treated her like a queen of the realm all the time,” Ray interrupted harshly. “That makes no difference to neither me nor Chan. The main thing is—he brought us out here, away from the claim—and gave us months of the worst hell I ever hope to spend. I guess you ain’t forgotten what Chan found out in Snowy Gulch—that the claim’s recorded—in old Hiram’s name. This Darby’s got a letter in his pocket from Hiram’s brother that would stand in any court. We’ve got to get that first. If Darby was an angel I’d mash him under my heel just the same; we’ve gone too far to start crawfishing. Just let me see him tied up in front of me —”

Beatrice did not linger to hear more. She had her answer: only in Ben’s continued concealment lay the least hope of his salvation. These wolves about the fire meant what they said. But already her plans were shaping; and now she saw the light.

In the kyack of venison lay her own and her lover’s safety: it contained enough nutritious food to sustain them until the fall rains could swell the Yuga and enable them to escape down to the Indian encampment. Her mind was swift and keen as never before: swiftly she perfected the last detail of her plan. The canoe, due to Ben’s foresight, was securely hidden in a maze of tall reeds on the lake shore: they were certain to overlook it. The cavern, however, was almost certain to be discovered in the next day’s search. They must make their escape to-night.

Ben, though terribly weakened, would be able to walk a short distance with her help. They could slip into the deepest forest, concealing themselves in the coverts until the three men had given up the search and gone away. She would take their robes and blankets to keep them warm; a camp fire would of course reveal their hiding place. The work could easily be accomplished in the midnight shadows: deliverance, salvation, life itself depended on the tide of fate in the next few hours.

She intended to steal the kyack of dried meat without which Ben and herself could not live. She crept back farther into the underbrush; then waited, scarcely breathing, while the fire died down. Already the three men were preparing to go to their bunks. Chan had already lain down; her father was removing his coat and boots. Ray, however, still sat in the firelight.

The moments passed. Would he never rise and go? The fire, however, was dying: its circle of ruddy light ever drew inward. The kyack was quite in the shadow now, yet she dared not attempt its theft until the three men were asleep. She waited, thrilling with excitement.

Chan and Neilson were seemingly asleep, and now Ray was knocking the ashes from his pipe. He yawned, stretching wide his arms; then, as if held by some intriguing thought, sat almost motionless, gazing into the graying coals. Presently Beatrice heard him curse, softly, in the shadows.

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He got up, and removing his outer coat, rolled in his blankets. The night hours began their mystic march across the face of the wilderness.

Now was the time to act. As far as she could tell, the three men were deeply asleep: at least the likelihood would be as great as at any time later in the night. The fire was a heap of gray ashes except for its red-hot center: the kyack was in gloom. Very softly she crept through the thickets, meanwhile encircling the dying fire, and came up behind it.

Now it was almost in reach: now her hands were at its loops. She started to lift it in her arms.

But disaster still dogged her trail. Ray Brent had been too wary of attack, to-night, to sink easily into deep slumber. He heard the soft movement as Beatrice lifted the heavy canvas bag off the ground; and with a startled oath sprang to his feet.

He leaped like a panther. "Who's there?" he cried.

Sensing immediate discovery the girl placed all her hope in flight. Perhaps yet she could lose her pursuers in the darkness. Still trying to hold the kyack of food that meant life to Ben, she turned and darted into the shadows.

Like a wolf Ray sped after her. The moonlight showed her fleeing figure in the trees, and shouting aloud he sprang through the coverts to intercept her flight. The chase was of short duration thereafter. Emburdened by the heavy box she could not watch her step; and a protruding root caught cruelly at her ankle. She was hurled with stunning force to the ground.

Desperate and intent, but in realization of impending triumph, Ray's strong arms went about her.

XXXIX

For the second time in his life Ray Brent felt the sting of Beatrice's strong hand against his face. In the desperation of fear she had smote him with all her force. His arms withdrew quickly from about her; and her wide, disdainful eyes beheld a sinister change in his expression. The moonlight was in his eyes, silver-white; and they seemed actually to redden with fury, and again she saw that queer, ghastly twitching at the corner of his lips. The girl's defiance was broken with that one blow. She dropped her head, then walked past him into the presence of her father.

Neilson and Chan were on their feet now, and they regarded her in the utter silence of amazement. Breathing fast, Ray came behind her.

“Build up the fire, Chan,” he said in a strange, grim voice. “We want to see what we’ve caught.”

Obediently Chan kicked the coals from under the ashes, and began to heap on broken pieces of wood. The sticks smoked, then a little tongue of yellow flame crept about the fuel. But still the emburdened silence continued—the white-faced girl in the ring of silent, watching men.

Slowly the fire’s glow crept out to her, revealing—even better than the bright moonlight—her wide, frightened eyes and the dark, speculative faces of the men. Then Ray spoke sharply in his place.

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"Well, why don't you question her?" he demanded of Neilson. "I suppose you know what she was doing. She was trying to steal food. It looks to me like she's gone over to the opposite camp."

Her father sighed, a peculiar sound that seemed to come from above the tree tops, as if fast-flying waterfowl were passing overhead. "Is that so, daughter?" he asked simply.

"I was trying to take some of your food—to Ben," Beatrice replied softly. "He's in need of it."

"You see, they're on intimate terms," Ray suggested viciously. "Ben was in need of food—so she came here to steal it."

But Neilson acted as if he had not heard. "Why didn't you speak to us—and tell us you were safe?" he asked. "We've come all the way here to find you."

"Perhaps *you* did. If you had been here alone, I would have told you. But Ray and Chan came all the way here to find Ben. I heard what they said—back there in the brush. They intend to kill him when they find him. I—I didn't want him killed."

Her father stared at her from under his bushy brows. "After carrying you from your home—taking you into danger and keeping you a prisoner—you still want to protect him?"

The girl nodded. "And I want you to protect him, too," she said. "Against these men." Suddenly she moved forward in earnest appeal. "Oh, Father—I want you to save him. He's never touched me—he's treated me with every respect—done everything he could for me. When he was injured he told me to go back—to take what little food there was, and go back—"

"I can take it, then, that you're out of food?" Ray asked.

"We're starving—and Ben's sick. Father, I make this one appeal—if your love for me isn't all gone, you'll grant it. I love him. You might as well know that now, as later. I want you to save the man your daughter loves."

Chan cursed in the gloom, his lean face darkened; but Neilson made no answer. Ray in his place sharply inhaled; but the sullen glow in his eyes snapped into a flame.

If Beatrice had glanced at Ray, she would have ceased her appeal and trusted everything to the doubtful mercy of flight,—into the gloom of the forest. As it was, she did not fully comprehend the cruel lust, like flame, that sped through his veins. She would have hoped for no mercy if she could have seen the strange, black surge of wrath in his face.



“He has been kind to me—and he was in the right, not in the wrong. I know about the claim-jumping. Father, I want you to stand between him and these men—help him—and give him food. I didn’t speak to you because I was afraid for him—afraid you’d kill him or do some other awful thing to him—”

Slowly her father shook his head. “But I can’t save him now. He brought this on himself.”

“Remember, he was in the right,” the girl pleaded brokenly. “You won’t—you couldn’t be a partner to murder. That’s all it would be—murder—brutal, terrible, cold-blooded murder—if you kill him without a fight. It couldn’t be in defense of me—I tell you he hasn’t injured me—but was always kind to me. It would be just to take that letter away from him—”

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"So he has the letter, has he?" Ray interrupted. He smiled grimly, and his tone was again flat and strained. "And he's sick—and starving. It isn't for your father to say, Beatrice, what's to be done with Ben. There's three of us here, and he's just one. Don't go interfering with what doesn't concern you, either—about the claim. You take us where he is, and we'll decide what to do with him."

Her eyes went to his face; and her lips closed tight. Here was one thing, on this mortal earth, that she must not tell. Perhaps, by the mercy of heaven, they would not find the cave, hidden as it was at the edge of the little glade. The forests were boundless; perhaps they would miss the place in their search. She straightened, scarcely perceptibly.

"Yes, tell us where he is," her father urged. "That's the first thing. We'll find him, anyway, in the morning."

The girl shook her head. She knew now that even if they promised mercy she must not reveal Ben's whereabouts. Their rage and cruelty would not be stayed for a spoken promise. The only card she had left, her one last, feeble hope of preserving Ben's life, lay in her continued silence. Ray's foul-nailed, eager hands could claw her lips apart, but he could not make her speak.

"I won't tell you," she answered at last, more clearly than she had spoken since her capture. "You said a few minutes ago I had gone over—to the opposite camp. I am, from now on. He was in the right, and he gave up his fight against you long ago. Now I want to go."

Fearing that Neilson might show mercy, Ray leaped in front of her. "You don't go yet awhile," he told her grimly. "I've got a few minutes' business with you yet. I tell you that we'll find him, if we have to search all year. And he'll have twice the chance of getting out alive if you tell us where he is."

She looked into his face, and she knew what that chance was. Her eyelids dropped halfway, and she shook her head. "I'd die first," she answered.

"It never occurred to you, did it, that there's ways of *making* people tell things." He suddenly whirled, with drawn lips, to her father. "Neilson, is there any reason for showing any further consideration to this wench of yours? She's betrayed us—gone over to the opposite camp—lived for weeks, willing, with Ben. I for one am never going to see her leave this camp till she tells us where he is. I'm tired of talking and waiting. I'm going to get that paper away from him, and I'm going to smash his heart with my heel. We've almost won out—and I'm going to go the rest of the way."

Neilson straightened, his eyes steely and bright under his grizzled brows. Only too well he knew that this was the test. Affairs were at their crisis at last. But in this final

moment his love for his daughter swept back to him in all its unmeasured fullness,—and when all was said and done it was the first, the mightiest impulse in his life. Ben had been kind to her, and she loved him; and all at once he knew that he could not yield him or her to the mercy of this black-hearted man before him.

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He had lived an iniquitous life; he was inured to all except the worst forms of wickedness; but for the moment—in love of his daughter—he stood redeemed. He was on the right side at last. His hand drew back, and his face was like iron.

“Shut that foul mouth!” he cautioned, with a curious, deadly evenness of tone. “I haven’t surrendered yet to you two wolves. If one of you dares to lay a hand on Beatrice, I’ll kill him where he stands.”

Even as he spoke his thought went to his rifle, leaning against a dead log ten feet away. This was the moment of test: the jealousy and rivalry and hatred between himself and Ray had reached the crisis. And the spirit of murder, terrible past any demon of the Pit, came stalking from the savage forest into the ruddy firelight.

Ray leered, his muscles bunching. “And I say to you, you’re a dirty traitor too,” he answered. “She ain’t your daughter any more. She’s Ben Darby’s squaw. She’s not fit for a white man to touch any more, for all her lies. You say one word and you’ll get it too.”

And at that instant the speeding pace of time seemed to halt, showing this accursed scene, so savage and terrible in the eerie light of the camp fire, at the edge of the haunted, breathless darkness, in vivid and ghastly detail. Neilson leaped forward with all his power; and if his blow had gone home, Ray would have been shattered beneath it like a tree in the lightning blast. But Ray’s arms were incredibly swift, and his rifle leaped in his hands.

The barrel gleamed. The roar reechoed in the silence. Neilson’s head bowed strangely; and for a moment he stood swaying, a ghastly blankness on his face; then pitched forward in the dew-wet grass.

Beatrice’s last defense had fallen, seriously wounded; and Ray’s arm seized her as, screaming, she tried to flee.

XL

The shot that wounded Jeffery Neilson carried far through the forest aisles, reechoing against the hills, and arresting, for one breathless moment, all the business of the wilderness. The feeding caribou swung his horns and tried to catch the scent; the moose, grubbing for water roots in the lake bottom, lifted his grotesque head and stood like a form in black iron. It came clear as a voice to the cavern where Ben lay.

The man started violently in his cot. His entire nervous system seemed to react. Then there ensued a curious state in which his physical functions seemed to cease,—his heart motionless in his breast, his body tensely rigid, his breath held. There was an infinite straining and travail in his mind.

The truth was that the sound acted much as a powerful stimulant to his retarded nervous forces. It was the one thing his resting nerve-system needed; it was as if chemicals were in suspension in a crucible, and at a slight jar of the glass they made mysterious union and expelled a precipitation. Almost instantly he recognized the sound that had reached him, with a clear and unmistakable recognition such as he had not experienced since the night of the accident, as the report of a rifle. His mind gave a great leap and remembered its familiar world.

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A rifle—probably discharged by Beatrice in a hunt after big game. It was true that their meat supply was low; he remembered now. Yet it was curious that she should be hunting after dark. The gloom was deep at the cavern mouth. Besides, he had always kept his rifle from her, fearing that she might turn it against him. He looked about him, trying to locate the source of the flood of light on the cavern floor. It was the moon, and it showed that the girl was gone. He started to sit up.

But his left arm did not react just properly to the command of his brain. It impeded him, and its old strength was impaired. For a moment more he lay quiet, deep in thought. Of course—he had been injured by the falling tree. He remembered clearly, now. And the rifle had been broken.

The only possible explanation for the shot was that a rifle had been fired by some invader in their valley—in all probability Neilson or one of his men. Beatrice's absence would also indicate this fact: perhaps she had already joined her father and was on her way back to Snowy Gulch with him. In that case, why had he himself been spared?

He looked out of the door of the cavern, trying to get some idea of the lateness of the hour. The very quality of the darkness indicated that the night was far advanced. Neilson would not be hunting game at this hour. Was his own war—planned long ago—even now being waged in ways beyond his ken?

His old concern for Beatrice swept through him. With considerable difficulty he got to his feet, then holding on to the wail, guided himself to the shelf where they ordinarily kept their little store of matches. He scratched one of them against the wall.

In the flaring light his eyes made a swift but careful appraisal of his surroundings. The girl's cot had not been slept in; and to his great amazement he saw that their food supplies were spent. Still holding to the wall he walked to the cave mouth.

Instantly his keen eyes saw the far-off gleam of the camp fire on the distant margin of the lake. For all that the hour was late, it burned high and bright. He watched it, vaguely conscious of the insidious advance of a ghastly fear. Beatrice was his ally now—if these weeks had sent home one fact to him it was this—and her absence might easily indicate that she was helpless in the enemy's hands. The thing suggested ugly possibilities. Yet he could not aid her. He could scarcely walk; even the knife that he wore at his belt was missing, probably carried by Beatrice when she gathered roots in the woods.

But presently all questions as to his course were settled for him. His straining ear caught the faintest, almost imperceptible vibration in the air—a soundwave so dim and obscure that it seemed impossible that the human mind could interpret it—but Ben recognized it in a flash. In some great trouble and horror, in the sullen light of that distant camp fire, Beatrice had screamed for aid.

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Only by the grace of the Red Gods had he heard the sound at all. Except for the fact that the half-mile intervening was as still as death, and that half the way the sound sped over water, he couldn't have hoped to perceive it. If the wind had blown elsewhere than straight toward him from the enemy camp, or if his marvelous sense of hearing had been less acute, the result would have been the same; and there could have been no answer from this dark man at the cave mouth who stood so tense and still. Finally, by instinct as much as by conscious intelligence, he identified the sound, marked it as a reality rather than a fancy, and read the tragic need behind it. Swiftly he started down the glade toward her.

Yet in a moment he knew that unless he conserved his strength he could not hope to make a fourth of the distance. At the first steps he swayed, half staggering. He had paid the price for his weeks of illness and his injuries. If he had been in a sick room, under a physician's care, he would have believed it impossible to walk unsupported across the room. But need is the mother of strength, and this was the test. Besides, he had had several days of convalescence that had put back into his sinews a measure of his mighty strength. Mostly he progressed by holding on to the trees, pulling himself forward step by step.

Likely he would come too late to change the girl's fate. Yet even now he knew he must not turn back. If the penalty were death, there must be no hesitancy in him; he must not withhold one step.

But it was a losing fight. The hill itself seemed endless; a hundred cruel yards of marsh must be traversed before ever he reached the nearest point by the lake. The enemy camp from where Beatrice had called to him lay on the far side of the lake, a distance of a full mile if he followed around the curving shore. And black and bitter self-hatred swept like fire through him when he realized that he could not possibly keep on his feet for so long a way.

Was this all he had fought for—surging upward through these long, weary weeks out of the shadow of death—only to fall dead on the trail in the moment of Beatrice's need? Instantly he knew that nothing in his life, no other desire or dream, had ever meant as much to him as this: that he might reach her side in time. Even his desire for vengeance, in that twilight madness, like Roland's, that had shaped his destiny, had been wavering and feeble compared to this. And no moment of his existence had ever been so dark, so bereft of the last, dim star of hope that lights men's way in the deep night of despair.

He gave no thought to the fact of his own helplessness against three armed men in case he did succeed in reaching their camp. The point could not possibly be considered. The imperious instincts that forced him on simply could not take it into reckoning. He knew only he must reach her side and put in her service all that he had.

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He fell again and again as he tried to make headway in the marsh. But always he forced himself up and on. Only too plain he saw that the time was even now upon him when he could no longer keep his feet at all. But still he plunged on, and with tragically slow encroachments the shore line drew up to him.

But he could not go on. The fire itself was hardly a quarter of a mile distant, directly across the lake, but to follow the long shore was an insuperable mile. Already his leg muscles were failing him, refusing to respond to the impulse of his nerves. Yet it might be that if he could make himself heard his enemies would leave the girl for a moment, at least—give her an instant's respite—while they came and dispatched his own life. Whatever they were doing to her, there in that ring of firelight, might be stayed for a moment, at least.

But at that instant he remembered the canoe. He had always kept it hidden in a little thicket of tall reeds,—if only the girl had not removed it from its place in his weeks of sickness! He plunged down into the tall tules. Yes, the boat was still in place.

It took all the strength of his weakened body to push it out from the reeds into the water. Then he seized the long pole they had sometimes used to propel themselves over the lake. Except for his injured arm, the paddle would have been better—he could have made better time and escaped the danger of being stranded in deep water—but he doubted that he could handle it with his faltering arm. He pushed off, putting most of the strain on his uninjured right arm.

The canoe was strongly but lightly made, so that it could be portaged with greatest possible ease; and his strokes, though feeble, propelled it slowly through the water. The great, white full moon, beloved of long ago, looked down from above the tall, dark heads of the spruce and changed the little water-body into a miracle of burnished silver. In its light Ben's face showed pale, but with a curious, calm strength.

The lake seemed untouched by the faint breath of wind that blew from the distant shore. The waters lay quiet, and the trout beneath saw the black shadow of the canoe as it passed. A cow moose and her calf sprang up the bank with a splash, frightened by the poling figure in the stern. And on the far shore, clear where the lake had its outlet in a small river, even more keen wilderness eyes might have beheld the black, moving dot that was the craft. But the distance was too far and the wind was wrong for the keen mind behind the eyes to make any sort of an interpretation.

It might have been that Fenris the wolf, running with a female and two younger males that he had mastered that long-ago night on the ridge, paused in his hunting to watch and wonder. But his wild brute thoughts were not under the bondage of memory to-night; his savage heart was thrilled and full; and more than likely he did not even turn his head.



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Ray and Chan, standing beside their prisoner in their grisly camp on the opposite shore, might have beheld Ben's approach if weightier matters had not occupied their minds. They had only to walk to the edge of the firelight and stare down through a rift in the trees to see him. But they stood with the angry glare revealing a strange and sinister intentness in their drawn faces and ominous speculations in their evil eyes.

XLI

It was a wilderness moon that rose over the spruce to-night,—white as new silver, incredibly large, inscrutably mysterious. The winds had whisked away the last pale cloud that might have dimmed its glory, and its light poured down with equal bounty on peak and hill, forest and yellow marsh. The heavy woods partook most deeply of its enchantment: tall, stately trees pale and nebulous as if with silver frost, each little stream dancing and shimmering in its light, every glade laid with a fairy tapestry, every shadow dreadful and black in contrast. The wilderness breathed and shivered as if swept with passion.

The wilderness moon is the moon of desire; and all this great space of silence seemed to respond. It seemed to throb, like one living entity, as if in longing for something lost long ago—a half-forgotten happiness, a glory and a triumph that were gone never to return. No creatures that followed the woods trails were dull and flat to-night. They were all swept with mystery, knowing vague longings or fierce desires. It was the harvest moon; but here it did not light the fields so that men might harvest grain. Rather it illumined the hunting trails so that the beasts of prey might find relief from the wild lusts and seething ferment that was in their veins. But mostly the forest mood was disconsolate, rather than savage, to-night. The wild geese on the lake called their weird and plaintive cries, their strange complaints that no man understands; the loons laughed in insane despair; and the coyotes on the ridge wailed out the pain of living and the vague longings of their wild hearts.

In the glory of that moon Fenris the wolf knew the same, resistless longings that so many times before had turned him from the game trails. There was something here that was unutterably dear to him,—something that drew him, called him like a voice, and he could not turn aside. Because he was a beast, he likely did not know the force that was drawing him again along the lake shore. Yet the souls of the lower creatures no man knows; and perhaps he had conscious longings, profoundly intense, for a moment's touch of a strong hand on his shoulder,—one never-to-be-forgotten caress from a certain god that had gone to a cave to live. It was true that his wild instincts, ever more in dominance these past weeks, would likely halt him at the cavern maw, permitting no intimacy other than to ascertain that all was well. They were too strong ever to brook man's control again. The moon was a moon of desire, but only because it was also the moon of memory,—and perhaps memories, stirring and exalting, were sweeping through him. Straight as an arrow he turned toward the cave.

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His followers—the gaunt female and two younger males, the structure about which the winter pack would form—hesitated at first. They had no commanding memories of the cavern on the far side of the lake. Yet Fenris was their leader; by the deep-lying laws of the pack they must follow where he led. They could not decoy him into the trails of game. As ever they sped swiftly, silently after him.

In this forest of desires Ben knew but one,—that he might yet be of aid to Beatrice. But he knew in his heart that it was a vain hope. He was within a hundred yards of Ray's camp now, but the struggle to reach the lake and the poling across its waters had brought him seemingly to the absolute limit of his strength, clear to the brink of utter exhaustion. Never in his life before had he known the full meaning of fatigue,—fatigue that was like a paralysis, blunting the mechanism of the brain, burning like a slow fire in his muscles, poisoning the vital fluids of his nerves. Stroke after stroke, never ceasing! —The flame was high, crackling—just before him. Through a rift in the trees he could see the outline of two men and the slim form of the girl. Just a few yards more.

But of all the desires that the moon invoked in the woods people there were none so unredeemed, so wicked and cruel as this that slowly wakened in the evil hearts of these two degenerate men, Beatrice's captors. She sensed it only vaguely at first. All the disasters that had fallen upon her had not taught her to accept such a thing as this: surely this would be spared her, at least. There is a kindly blind spot in the brain that often will not let the ugly truth go home.

For a strange, still moment Ray's face seemed devoid of all expression. It was flat and lifeless as dark clay. Then Beatrice felt the insult of his quickening gaze.

"Put a rope around her wrists, Chan," he said. "We don't want to take chances on her getting away."

He spoke slowly, rather flatly. There was nothing that her senses could seize upon—either in his face or voice to justify the swift, strangling, killing horror that came upon her. He stood simply gazing, and as she met his gaze her lips parted and drew back in a grimace of terror; thus they stood until the blood began to leap fast in Chan's veins. She needed no further disillusionment. Chan spoke behind her, a startled oath cut off short, and she felt him moving swiftly toward her. It was her last instant of respite; and her muscle set and drew for a final, desperate attempt at self-defense.

She wore Ben's knife at her belt, and her hand sped toward it. But the motion, fast as it was, came too late. Chan saw it; and leaping swiftly, his arms went about her and pinned her own arms to her sides.

She tried in vain to fight her way out of his grasp. She writhed, screaming; and in the frenzy of her fear she all but succeeded in hurling him off. She managed to draw the

knife clear of the sheath, yet she couldn't raise her arm to strike. Ray was aiding his confederate now; and in an instant more she was helpless.

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Their drawn faces bent close to hers. She felt their hot hands as they drew her wrists in front of her and fastened them with a rope. "Not too tight, Chan," Ray advised. "We don't want her to get uncomfortable before we're done with her. Don't tie her ankles; she can't run through the brush with her arms tied.—Now give her a moment to breathe."

They stood on each side of her, regarding her with secret, growing excitement. Already they had descended too far to know pity for this girl. The wide-open eyes, so dark with terror and in contrast with the stark paleness of her face, the lips that trembled so piteously, the slender, girlish figure so helpless to their depraved desires moved them not at all.

The scene was one of never-to-be-forgotten vividness. The tenderness and mercy, most of all the restraint that has become manifest in men in these centuries since they have left their forest lairs to live in permanent abodes, had no place here. About them ringed the primeval forest, ensilvered by the moon; the fire crackled with a dread ferocity; and at the edge of the thickets the motionless form of Jeffery Neilson lay with face buried in the soft, summer grass. All was silent and motionless, except the fierce crackling of the fire; except a curious, intermittent, upward twitching of the corner of Ray's lips.

"So you and Ben are bunkies now, are you?" he asked slowly, without emphasis.

But the girl made no reply, only gazing at him with starting eyes.

"A traitor to us, and Ben's squaw!" He turned fiercely to Chan. "I guess that gives us right to do what we want to with her. And now she can yell if she wants to for her lover to come and save her."

She did not even try to buy their mercy by informing them where they might find Ben. Only too well she knew that their dreadful intentions could not be turned aside: she would only sacrifice Ben without aiding herself. Ray moved toward her, his eyes deeply sunken, the pupils abnormally enlarged.

"You haven't lost all your looks," he told her breathlessly. "That mouth is still pretty enough to kiss. And I guess you won't slap—this time—"

He drew her toward him, his dark face lowering toward hers. She struggled, trying to wrench away from him. Helpless and alone, the moment of final horror was at hand. In this last instant her whole being leaped again to Ben,—the man whose strength had been her fort throughout all their first weeks in the wilds, but whom she had left helpless and sick in the distant cavern. Yet even now he would rise and come to her if he knew of her peril. Her voice rose shrilly to a scream. "Ben—help me!"

And Ray's hands fell from her shoulders as he heard the incredible answer from the shore of the lake. The brush rustled and cracked: there was a strange sound of a heavy footfall,—slow, unsteady, but approaching them as certain as the speeding stars approach their mysterious destinations in the far reaches of the sky. Ray straightened, staring; Chan stood as if frozen, his hands half-raised, his eyes wide open.

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"I'm coming, Beatrice," some one said in the coverts. Her cries, uttered when her father fell, had not gone unheard. In the last stages of exhaustion, deathly pale yet with a face of iron, Ben came reeling toward them out of the moonlight.

XLII

Ben walked quietly into the circle of firelight and stood at Beatrice's side. But while Ray and Chan gazed at him as if he were a spectre from the grave, Beatrice's only impulse was one of immeasurable and unspeakable thankfulness. No fate on earth was so dreadful but that it would be somewhat alleviated by the fact of his presence: just the sight of him, standing beside her, put her in some vague way out of Ray's power to harm. Exhausted, reeling, he was still the prop of her life and hope.

"Here I am," he said quietly. "The letter's in my pocket. Do what you want with me—but let Beatrice go."

His words brought Ray to himself in some degree at least. The ridiculous fear of the moment before speedily passed away. Why, the man was exhausted—helpless in their hands—and the letter was in his pocket. It meant *triumph*—nothing else. All Ray's aims had been attained. With Ben's death the claim, a fourth of which had been his motive when he had slain Ezram, would pass entirely to him,—except for such share as he would have to give Chan. His star of fortune was in the sky. It was his moment of glory,—long-awaited but enrapturing him at last.

Neilson lay seriously wounded, perhaps dead by now. Whatever his injuries, he would not go back with them to share in the gold of the claim. The girl, also, was his prey,—to do with what he liked.

"I see you've come," he answered. "You might as well; we'd have found you to-morrow." His voice was no longer flat, but rather exultant, boasting. "You thought you could get away—but we've shown you."

Ben nodded. "You are—" he strained for the name he had heard Beatrice speak so often—"Ray Brent?" His eyes fell to the form of Neilson, wounded beyond the fire. "I see you've been at your old job—killing. It was you who killed Ezra Melville."

Ray smiled, ever so faintly: this was what he loved. "You're talking to the right man. Anything you'd like to do about it?"

Ben's face hardened. "There is nothing I can do, now. You came too late. But I would have had something to do if I had my rifle. I'm glad it was you, not Beatrice's father. I ask you this—will you accept my proposition. To take Ezram's letter, destroy it and me too—and let the girl go in safety?"

Beatrice stretched her bound arms and touched his hairy wrist. “No, Ben,” she told him quietly. “There’s no use of trying to make such a bargain as that. Men that murder—and assault women,—won’t keep their word.”

“They were about to attack you, were they?” His voice dropped a tone; otherwise it seemed the same.

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"Yes—just as you came."

He turned once more to Ray, eyeing him with such a look of contempt and scorn that it smarted like a whiplash in spite of the protecting mantel of his new-found triumph. "Oh, you depraved dogs!" he told them quietly and distinctly. "You yellow, mongrel cowards!"

Ray straightened, stung by the words. "And I'll make you wish you was dead before you ever said that," he threatened. "I'll tell you what you wanted to know a minute ago—and I tell you no. I won't make any deal with you. We'll do what we like to you, and we'll do what we like with your dirty squaw, too—the woman you've been living with all these months. We've got you where we want you. You're in no fix to make terms. Chan—put a rope around his legs and a gag in his rotten mouth!"

They moved toward him simultaneously, and Ben summoned the last jot of his almost-spent strength to hurl them off. They did not need deadly weapons for this wasted form. Yet for the duration of one second Ben fought with an incredible ferocity and valor.

He hurled Chan from his path, and his sound right arm leaped to Ray's throat in a death grip. For that one instant his old-time strength returned to him,—as to Samson as his arms went about the pillars of the temple. They found him no weakling, in that first instant, but a deadly, fighting beast, the "Wolf" Darby of the provinces,—his finger nails sinking ever deeper into the flesh of Ray's throat, his body braced against Chan's attack. And for all that Beatrice's arms were tied, she leaped like a she-wolf to her lover's aid.

But such an unequal battle could last only an instant. Ray focused his attack upon Ben's injured left arm, Chan struck once at the girl, hurling her to the ground with a base blow, then lashed brutal blows into Ben's face. The burst of strength ebbed as quickly as it had come: his legs wilted under him, and he sank slowly to the ground.

Maddened with battle, for a moment more Chan lashed cowardly blows into his face; and he left the brutal labor only to help Ray affix ropes about his ankles. Then the two conquerors stood erect, breathing loudly.

Seemingly the utter limit of their brutality was reached,—but for the moment only. A strange and foreboding silence fell over the camp: only the sound of troubled breathing was heard above the lessening crackle of the fire. They did not turn at once again to the work of crushing Ben's life out with their fists and boots, nor did they restrain Beatrice as she crawled over the blood-stained grass to reach her lover's side.

"Let her go," Ray said to Charley. "She can't help him any."

It was true. They had put up their last defense. The girl crept nearer, lying almost prone beside him, and her soft hands stole over his bruised flesh. But no tears came now. She was past the kindly mercy of tears. She could only gaze at him, and sometimes dry half-sobs clutched at her throat. The man half-opened his eyes, smiling.

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Life still remained in his rugged body. Even the cruel test of the last hour had not taken that from him. The sturdy heart still beat, and the breath still whispered through his lips: there was life in plenty to afford such sport as Ray and Chan might have for him.

The last, least quality of redemption—such magic and beauty as might have been wrought by the firelight dancing over the moonlit glade—was quite gone now. The powers of wickedness were in the ascendency, and this was only the abode of horror. Yet it was all tragically true, not a nightmare from which she would soon waken. This was the remote heart of Back There—a primeval land where the demons of lust and death walked unrestrained—and the shadow of the moonlit trees fell dark upon her.

The back logs were burning dully now, and the coals were red, and Chan and Ray took seats on a huge, dead spruce to talk over their further plans. It was all easy enough. They could linger here, living mostly on meat, until the rising waters of the Yuga could carry them down to the Indian villages. Their methods and procedure in regard to Ben were the only remaining questions.

For a few minutes they took little notice of the prone figures at the far edge of the fading firelight. In their hands they were as helpless as Jeffery Neilson, left already by the receding radiance to the soft mercy of the shadows. Attention could be given them soon enough. Their own triumph was beginning to give way to deep fatigue.

Ben and Beatrice had talked softly at first, accepting their fate at last and trying to forget all things but the fact of each other's presence. They had kept the faith to-night, they had both been true; and perhaps they had conquered, in some degree, the horror of death. His right hand held hers close to his lips, and only she could understand the message in its soft pressure, and the gentle, kindly shadows in his quiet eyes. But presently her gaze fastened on some object in the grass beside him.

He did not understand at first. He knew enough not to attract his enemies' attention by trying to turn. The girl relaxed again, but her hand throbbed in his, and her eyes shone somberly as if the luster of some strange, dark hope.

"What is it?" he asked whispering.

"I see a way out—for us both," she told him. She knew he would not misunderstand and dream that she saw an actual avenue to life and safety. "Don't give any sign."

"Then hurry," he urged. "They may be back any instant. What is it?"

"A way to cheat 'em—to keep them from torturing you—and to save me—from all the things they'll do to me—when you're dead. Oh, Ben—you won't fail me—you'll do it for me."

He smiled, gently and strongly. "Do you think I'd fail you now?"

“Then reach your good arm on the other side—soft as you can. There’s a knife lying there—your own knife—they knocked out of my hand. They’ll jump at the first gleam. You know what to do—first me, in the throat—then yourself.”

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His face showed no horror at her words. They were down to the most terrible realities; and as she had said, this was the way out! The great kindness still dwelt in his eyes—and she knew he would do as she asked.

One gleam of steal, one swift touch at the throat—and they would never know the unspeakable fate that their depraved captors planned for them. *It was no less than victory in the last instant of despair!* It was freedom: although they did not know into what Mystery and what Fear the act would dispatch them, it was freedom from Ray and Chan, none the less. And Ben welcomed the plan as might a prisoner, waiting in the death-cell, welcome a reprieve.

He turned, groping with his hand. There was no use of waiting longer. The knife lay just beyond his reach; and softly he moved his body through the grass.

But this gate to mercy was closed before they reached it. A sudden flaring of the fire revealed them—the gleam of the blade and Ben's stretching hand—and Ray left his log in a swift, catlike leap.

If Ben had possessed full use of both hands there still might have been time to send home the two crucial blows, or at least to dispatch Beatrice out of Ray's power to harm. But his injured arm impeded him, and his hand fumbled as he tried to seize the hilt. With a sharp oath Ray crushed the blade into the ground with his heel; then kicked viciously at the prone body of his enemy.

And at that first base blow his rage and blood-lust that had been gathering was swiftly freed. It was all that was needed to set him at the work of torture. For an instant he stood almost motionless except for the spasmodic twitching—now almost continuous—at his lips and for the slow turning of his head as he looked about for a weapon with which he could more quickly satiate the murder-madness in his veins. The knife appealed to him not at all; but his eye fell on a long, heavy club of spruce that had been cut for fuel. He bent and his strong hands seized it.

As he swung it high the girl leaped between—with a last, frantic effort, wholly instinctive—to shield Ben's body with her own. But it was only an instant's reprieve. Chan had followed Ben, and sharing Ray's fiendish mood, jerked her aside. Ben raised himself up as far as he could at a final impulse to thrust the girl out of harm's way.

Yet it was to be that Ray's murderous blow was never to go home. A mighty and terrible ally had come to Ben's aid. He came pouncing from the darkness, a gaunt and dreadful avenger whose code of death was as remorseless as Ray's own.



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It was Fenris the wolf, and he had found his master at last. Missing him at the accustomed place in the cave, he had trailed him to the lake margin: a smell on the wind had led him the rest of the way. He was not one to announce his coming by an audible footfall in the thicket. Like a ghost he had glided almost to the edge of the firelight, lingering there—with a caution learned in these last wild weeks of running with his brethren—until he had made up his brute mind in regard to the strangers in the camp. But he had waited only until he saw Ray kick the helpless form before him,—that of the god that Fenris, for all the wild had claimed him, still worshipped in his inmost heart. With fiendish, maniacal fury he had sprung to avenge the blow.

And his three followers, trained by the pack laws to follow where he led, and keyed to the highest pitch by their leader's fury, leaped like gray demons of the Pit in his wake.

XLII

As a young tree breaks and goes down in the gale Ray Brent went down before the combined attack of the wolves. What desperate struggle he made only seemed to increase their fury and shatter him the faster. Utterly futile were all his blows: his frantic, piercing screams of fear and agony raised to heaven, but were answered with no greater mercy than that he would have shown to Ben a moment before.

Seemingly in an instant he was on his back and the ravening pack were about him in a ring. In that lurid firelight their fangs gleamed like ivory as they flashed, here and there, over his body and throat, and their fierce eyes blazed with pale-blue fire,—the mark and sign of the blood madness of the beasts of prey.

Seemingly in a single instant the life had been torn from him, leaving only a strange, huddled, ghastly thing beside the dying fire. But the pack leaped from him at once. Fenris had caught sight of Chan's figure as he ran for the nearest tree and seemingly with one leap he was upon him. He sprang at him from the side; and his fangs gleamed once.

He had struck true, his fangs went home, and the life went out of Chan Heminway in a single, neighing scream. He pitched forward, shuddered once in the soft grass, and lay still. The pack surged around his body, struck at it once or twice, then stood growling as if waiting for their leader's command.

Before ever Ray fell, Ben had taken what measures of self-defense he could in case the pack, forgetting its master's master, might turn on himself and the girl. He had reached the knife hilt and severed the ropes about the girl's wrists. "Stay behind me," he cautioned. "Don't move a muscle."

He knew that any attempt to reach and climb a tree would attract the attention of the pack and send them ravaging about her. Again he knew that her life as well as his own depended on his control of the pack leader. He saw Chan go down, seemingly in a single instant, and he braced himself against attack. "Down, Fenris!" he shouted. "Down—get down!"

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The great wolf started at the voice, then stood beside the fallen, gazing at Ben with fierce, luminous eyes. “Down, down, boy,” Ben cautioned, in a softer voice. “There, old fellow—down—down.”

Then Fenris whined in answer, and Ben knew that he was no longer to be feared. The three lesser wolves seemed startled, standing in a nervous group, yet growling savagely and eyeing him across the dying fire. For a moment Fenris’s fury had passed to them, but now that his rage was dead, all they had left was an inborn fear of such a breed as this,—these tall forms that died so easily in their fangs. Fenris trotted slowly toward Ben, but with the true instincts of the wild his followers knew that this was no affair of fangs and death. He came in love, in a remembered comradeship, just as often he had led them to the mouth of the cavern, and they did not understand. They slowly backed away into the shadows, fading like ghosts.

Ben’s arms, in unspeakable gratitude, went about the shoulders of the wolf. Beatrice, sobbing uncontrollably yet swept with that infinite thankfulness of the redeemed, crept to his side. Fenris whined and shivered in the arms of his god.

Quietude came at last to that camp beside the lake, in the far, hidden heart of Back There. Once more the blood moved with sweet, normal tranquillity in the veins, the thrill and stir died in the air, and the moonlight was beautiful on the spruce.

The wolves had gone. Fenris’s three brethren had slipped away, perhaps wholly mystified and deeply awed by their madness of a moment before; and from the ridge top they had called for their leader to join them. He had done his work, he had avenged the base blow that had seemed to strike at his own wild heart, he had received the caress he had craved,—and there was no law for him to stay. The female called enticingly; the wild game was running for his pleasure on the trails.

Ben had watched the struggle in his fierce breast, and Beatrice’s eyes were soft and wonderfully lustrous in the subdued light as she gave the wolf a parting caress. But he could not stay with them. The primal laws of his being bade otherwise. His was the way of the open trails, the nights of madness and the rapture of hunting—and these were folk of the caves! They were not his people, although his love for them burned like fire in his heart.

He could not deny the call of his followers on the ridge. It was like a chain, drawing him remorselessly to them. Whining, he had sped away into the darkness.

The fire had been built up, Beatrice had rallied her spent strength by full feeding of the rich, dried meat, and had done what she could for Neilson’s injury. Ben, exhausted, had lain down in some of the blankets of his enemy’s outfit. Neilson was not, however, mortally hurt. The bullet had coursed through the region of his shoulder, missing his

heart and lungs, and although he was all but unconscious, they had every reason to believe that a few weeks of rest would see him well again.

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Beatrice bathed the wound, bandaged it the best she could, then covered him up warmly and let him go to sleep. And the time came at last, long past the midnight hour, that she crept once more to Ben's side.

There was little indeed for them to say. The stress of the night had taken from them almost all desire to talk. But Ben took her hand in his feebly, and held it against his lips.

"We're safe now," Beatrice told him, her eye's still bright with tears. "We've seen it through, and we're safe."

Ben nodded happily. It was true: there was nothing further for them to fear. With the aid of the rifles of the three fallen, they could procure meat in plenty for their remaining time at Back There; besides, the store of jerked caribou and moose was enough to hold them over. When the rains came again, the three of them—Neilson and Ben and Beatrice—could glide on down to the Indian encampments in the canoe. Thence they could reach the white settlements beyond the mountains.

Her glance into the future went still farther, because she knew certain news that as yet Ben had not heard. She had heard from Ray's lips that night that Ben's claim had been legally filed; he had only to return and take possession. It straightened out the future, promised success in the battle of life, gave him an interest to hold him in these northern forests. But she would not tell him to-night. It could wait for a more quiet hour.

Presently she saw that he was trying to speak to her, whispering; trying to draw her ear down to his lips. She smiled, with an infinite tenderness. Dimly though he spoke, she heard him every word.

"I love you," he told her simply. He watched her face, as intently as the three Wise Men watched the East, for a sign. And he saw it, clear and ineffably wonderful, in the stars that came into her eyes.

"I love you," she answered, with equal simplicity. They lay a while in silence, blissful in this wonder each had for the other, wholly content just that their hands and lips should touch.

The same miracle was upon them both; and the girl's thought, ranging far, seized upon a deep and moving discovery. "All this belongs to us," she told him, indicating with one movement of her arm the boundless solitudes about them. "This is our own country, isn't it, Ben? We can't ever—go away."

It was true: they could never leave the forest for long. They were its children, bred in the bone. Their strong thews would waste in a gentler land. It was their heritage. They must not go where they could not behold the dark line of the forest against the sky.

The fire burned down. The moon wheeled through the sky. The tall spruce saw the dawn afar and beckoned.

THE END.